

Achieving Maximum Reach With Online Consumers

By Merilee Kern

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So, you've built a consumer-oriented Web site but they have not come. How can that be? After all, you've spent thousands upon thousands of dollars ensuring your site navigation is intuitive, your interface is user friendly and your eCommerce engine is functioning perfectly. Your customer service department is staffed and ready to fulfill orders as you frantically try to figure out why you don't have any. Perhaps it's time that you evaluate (or create) your online marketing plan to ensure you have the visibility you need to succeed in the online marketplace. Unfortunately, a simple listing within Yahoo just won't do. If you employ even a few of the strategies discussed herein, you will surely find that your site traffic will increase and, if you've done THAT good of a job with your Web site and have THAT good of a product and/or service, sales conversion should, too.

The Objectives

The basic objectives of an online marketing plan are varied, and each applies no matter the ultimate function of your Web site. First and foremost, all online marketing initiatives, promotions, etc. should serve to drive traffic to your Web site - preferably to one or more pages that allow you to track EXACTLY where each visitor came from so that you can evaluate and refine your chosen marketing outlets moving forward. Second, your online marketing initiatives and promotions should be crafted in a way that builds "online buzz" and excitement within the industry you operate. The third objective for any online marketing plan is to establish your company as a credible and trusted online source from which to procure the desired information, product and/or service that consumers are seeking. One way this can be achieved is by leveraging any leadership position, awards, rankings, and certifications your company and/or its employees have achieved within your industry. It's also crucial to leverage customer testimonials and press/media quotes as a "risk reliever" when trying to convert site visitors to paying customers.

Targets

As with any marketing plan, it's critical to understand exactly WHO your customer is - i.e., the current majority of your audience segment - so that you can accurately target and obtain maximum reach. Your target customer demographics will be a critical discriminator in determining how, when and where to execute your online marketing plan both in terms of expenditures and ROI.

Tactics

A mix of tactics should be evaluated when crafting your online marketing plan, and ultimately employed within the constraints of your marketing budget. Unlike traditional offline marketing

vehicles, there are numerous ways you can communicate and gain visibility online with potential customers.

Search Engine Optimization

Basic, yet oh-so-critical. It goes without saying that your Web site should be optimized so that it achieves maximum visibility within search engines, directories, and applicable portals and meta lists. As rankings within these properties are ever changing, search engine optimization should be an ongoing initiative managed by dedicated personnel who strive to master the intricacies of this art form.

Grassroots

Carefully targeting and establishing discrete communication with active communities found at the grassroots level of the Internet, such as consumers in newsgroups, LISTSERVs and message boards, is an integral part in establishing a sense of trust in a company's brand online. Companies should use these carefully targeted forums to leverage any industry expertise, as well as establish a conversation about the information, product and/or service being offered. Further, applicable chat room outlets should be identified and leveraged to discretely promote similar discussion about your company's offerings. It's imperative to seed these forums carefully as most of them do not allow blatant commercial advertising.

Because a company's reputation can be bolstered or damaged by the conversations that go on in Internet discussion areas, it is also vital that these forums be continually monitored for any information that is posted about your company (outside of your own postings), and to use this information to gauge the response of the Internet community to the site. Potential targets for this type of consumer outreach include About.com, Dreamlife.com, TalkCity.com, and high-level LISTSERV moderators.

Value The Value Add

One timeless incentive in drawing traffic to a given Web site is the availability of a free newsletter, which should include articles and information relevant to your target audience. Promoting this type of incentive not only acts as a draw to increase site traffic, but also allows your company to garner highly valuable information from your visitors that can be warehoused in a database and leveraged for a variety of marketing initiatives. In fact, relevant articles can even be used for grassroots marketing initiatives by seeding relevant newsgroups and message boards in a non-intrusive and casual way. Once the newsletter subscriber's information has been captured, converting him/her to a paying customer incurs no further customer acquisition costs and, therefore, generates a highly desirable ROI.

Viral Marketing

Viral marketing campaigns are online promotions that spread primarily through word-of-mouth, or click-of-mouse. Promotions of this sort have become particularly effective methods for increasing a site's traffic and brand recognition in a relatively short period of time. Viral marketing strategies are endless, and include some of the following:

Referral Program: Studies show that people are increasingly likely to visit, and buy from, a site that is recommended by a friend, family member, or co-worker. Consider implementing a program and allows (and rewards) your current customers if they bring in new ones.

Interactive Tools: Executable download files that are applicable to your target audience and that help users solve a problem, make life easier, or even provide entertainment are wildly popular. These "freeware" applications should be relatively simple so that they download quickly, should be designed so they can be easily emailed by site visitors, and should be user friendly. Once available,

these executable files will reside on your company's Web site for download, and can also be submitted to various freeware and download directories to facilitate maximum reach.

Enhanced Signature Files: Consider implementing an incentive-based initiative that allows visitors to your site to choose from a variety of branded signature files (often HTML) to "live on" emails they send out to friends, family members, co-workers, and others. By encouraging members to promote your site by appending their e-mail signature files with your message, your company will be able to promote its brand virally to new audiences.

Contests and Promotions

The purpose of contests and promotions are to drive site traffic through the use of an incentive, to reward/retain current customers and to extend your brand into additional Web properties, exposing new potential customers. Contests are a timeless way to leverage the "something for nothing" mentality to your advantage. When crafting contests and promotions, consider leveraging relationships you have with 3rd party partner firms who might donate a suitable prize in return for publicity, so that a cash outlay will not be required. Also consider donating prizes to other partner company's contests and promotions in return for publicity.

Content & Sponsorship Partnerships

Establishing relationships with strong, complementary Web properties that reach your target audience is key to successfully instilling your brand online. Identifying the right sites and brokering partnerships can be labor and time intensive, but will be well worth the effort. Partnership arrangements may be affiliate in nature, through which a partner site shares in revenue derived from their recommendation/promotion of your company's offer, or the creation of a co-branded Web site through which the partner company's offer is seamlessly integrated into your Web site interface - or vice versa.

Community is King

More and more, consumers are using the Web in their every day lives to establish personal relationships with their peers. If your company can discern a way to create a community or family environment within your Web site interface, then by all means DO IT. This might include establishing a product or service-specific message board where customers can interact with each other as well as your customer service staff to learn interesting and useful information regarding your products. Or, your company might institute a series of weekly online meetings that will allow experts within your company to have direct, one-on-one communication with your customers for live Q & A sessions. By facilitating a community or family environment within your Web site, you just might find that a customer initially visited your site and/or purchased from your company for obvious reasons such as a compelling offer, but have remained a loyal customer and return visitor due to relationships that have been established through your interface.

Get Creative

In the online arena, there are so many ways to employ "gorilla marketing" techniques that can be quite effective in helping to achieve your online marketing plan goals and objectives. Consider developing a branded club, which can be implemented on sites such as Yahoo! free of charge. This club could be a forum for your company to promote its information, products and/or services and leverage its newsletter content (if any) and expert advice to additional audiences. It can also be used to assist in positioning your company as the leading and most desirable source for your offering.

In Brief

In a nutshell, when crafting your online marketing plan you should think outside of the proverbial box since never before have there been so many ways to communicate with your prospects. Get

your creative juices flowing and, if nothing else, employ even a few of these basic consumer online marketing strategies for the positive results that have been so elusive.

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Merilee Kern has been marketing high technology, B2B and B2C products and services over the Internet since 1994. Through Kern Communications, her eMarketing consultancy, Merilee helps companies succeed at doing business on the Internet through a wide array of custom-tailored online marketing initiatives. Merilee can be reached via email at merileek@kerncomm.com or through her Web site at <http://www.kerncomm.com> .

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