

Practical Online Trust Building Strategies

By Merilee Kern

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Ways in which to build trust and long-term relationships with visitors to your site can, indeed, be elusive. It's not always necessary to think outside of the proverbial box, as some of the most effective strategies are among the most basic. Accordingly, below are a number of examples of how Web site operators can establish a foundation of trust, and a sense of loyalty, with its visitors.

Respect Privacy

First and foremost, make it very clear on your critical data capture/lead generation forms (CGIs and the like) that any and all information requested of and provided by your site's visitors will remain completely confidential, in that will not be sold, rented, and/or otherwise provided to 3rd parties. Doing so will provide a significant risk reliever that will increase response rates for your form, and will help establish the visitor's trust in the way your company maintains the integrity of each visitor's personal information.

Customer-Driven Communications

Let prospects and customers tell YOU how and when to communicate with them...and follow through accordingly! Empower visitors to your site to specify exactly what type of communications he/she would and/or would not like to receive from your company (both on and offline) through a simple online multi-title subscription form. By making each and every type of push contact with those who have visited your site "opt-in," not only will you increase the satisfaction level of the recipient and his/her receptiveness to the information presented, but your company can also significantly reduce costs associated with the mass production and deployment of such materials - particularly for offline communications. It goes without saying that you should provide an "opt-out" mechanism within every communication, irregardless of your process for adding subscribers, which should easily allow the visitor to cease communications, by type, at his/her discretion.

Make Your Intent Known

Don't take for granted that first time visitors to your site know exactly what the nature of your business is, nor should you take for granted the power of spotlighting the fundamentals that make your organization a success. Place some descriptive/positioning verbiage in an above the fold position on your Web site's home page. By allowing current and prospective customers and/or clients to repeatedly see these strong and clearly descriptive statements about your company and its intent, in conjunction with having favorable experiences using your Company's Web site, product and/or services, users will increasingly build a level of online trust and, when telling others about

your company, will likely quote directly from this highly visible language.

Float Important Content

If there is an element of your online offering that plays an integral role in your company's ability to build trusting relationships with its visitors, be sure it is readily accessible directly from the primary pages of your Web site, not the least of which is your home page. By concertedly directing users to this important information relative with just one click access will increase the probability that this mission-critical content will be seen by the user, and that his/her level of trust and confidence in your company will increase. This might be your published "Company Principals", privacy policy, press and/or customer/member testimonials, etc. If it's a keystone to your company's success, increase the likelihood that it will be seen! On your home page or, perhaps, every page throughout your entire site, consider embedding a predominantly placed intra-site "advertisement" in the GUI template - a flashy and noticeable, yet unobtrusive, graphic that links users directly to this critical information.

Ensure FAQs Aren't Questionable

In building consumer trust, ensure that your Web site is doing a more than adequate job of informing its users about the company, its products/services and customer support issues. FAQs should be an ongoing work in progress, in that they are never "done." Optimally, an organization's customer service department should be asked to log each daily/weekly series of queries received, as well as the given response. A record of this regularly occurring customer service-oriented Q&A dialogue should be provided to the company's marketing department for editing, refinement, expansion and integration into the published FAQ list (whether on or offline, or both), either as an update, if applicable, to a currently-listed FAQ or published as a new one. If, in the event, this content is not regularly updated as such, the FAQs (as well as all other site content) should be regularly evaluated to ensure the content remains accurate relative to the company's changing business landscape.

Usability & Quality Assurance

Errors on a Web site can crush consumer confidence in a flash. If your company has never had a Web site usability expert evaluate its site, it would behoove you to do so now. Such experts methodically analyze the usability, effectiveness and relevancy of your site, in addition to technical QA testing, in an effort to make absolutely certain that your e-business meets or exceeds the ever-changing expectations of your users. Once this initial, comprehensive evaluation is complete, your company should continue the usability "maintenance" initiative on whatever schedule is realistic relative to budget and/or staff considerations. Optimally, the site's user logs should be evaluated each month to analyze user behaviors, such as what page is the predominant entry and exit point, internal navigation paths, etc. Doing so will allow your company to continue fine tuning a number of elements including navigation schemes (menus), intra-site and external advertising messaging and/or link-to URLs, etc. In addition, Quality Assurance - systematic proofreading, evaluation, and testing of Web site content, navigation and functionality to ensure errors and bugs are promptly identified, reported and fixed - should be an ongoing initiative with "someone" (either in-house or outsourced) responsible and accountable on a day-to-day basis.

Free Offers Still Pull

One timeless way to draw first-time traffic to a Web site and to keep that visitor coming back for more is the availability of free content that has a high perceived value with your target audience, such as a newsletter. Promoting this type of free incentive acts as a draw that will increase the incidence of first time visitors, function virally as the visitor forwards the newsletter to others (which you should encourage/prompt recipients to do), and provide a subscription mechanism through which your company can garner highly valuable information from your visitors that can be databased and leveraged for a variety of highly targeted, and preferably personalized, internal direct marketing initiatives. Delivering such targeted communications based on data captured will give the visitor a sense that your company understands his/her unique needs, which is the ultimate foundation upon

which your company can establish a long-standing relationship. Further, once the visitor's data has been captured, converting him/her to a paying customer incurs no further customer acquisition costs and, therefore, generates a highly desirable ROI.

Highlight Success Stories

Leverage positive customer and/or member feedback by establishing a testimonials section, through which your company can publish, ONLY with the consumer's explicit permission to do so, of course, photos, names, company names and/or job titles with a selection of associated testimonial-based commentary. Even better, larger case studies could be created and leveraged to show how your company has solved problems for your customers. Giving visibility to such elaborated testimonials/case studies will serve to establish your company's credibility and will act as an all-important "risk reliever" as a prospective customer contemplates moving forward with a purchase, subscription, membership...whatever the case may be. Prospects WANT to see how a company has helped solve problems for others, and high visibility should be given for this type of content on your Web site as well as through other communication such as direct marketing, newsletters, and the like. Trust will surely be established through such glowing endorsements.

Spotlight Third-Party Endorsements

Also in the vein of establishing credibility and trust as well as establishing critical risk relievers, press quotes/testimonials, as available, should be better leveraged throughout your site and in other communications as well. Highlighting such press commentary about your company will go a long way toward establishing trust and, hence, improving sales conversion. Consider placing a glowing press quote (or two) in the margin of your membership registration/eCommerce checkout page, and see how conversion may increase accordingly. Press commentary and seeming endorsements carry a lot of weight with consumers, and should be exploited (in a good way) every chance you get.

Offer Proof of Trustworthiness

Want to show that you're trustworthy? Apply for, and secure, membership(s) with the BBBOnline Privacy and Reliability programs (see <http://www.bbbonline.com>), and similar programs from other Internet and related industry organizations. Upon securing such memberships, predominantly display the associated graphic image, perhaps somewhere in the GUI template of each page throughout your site. These seals carry a good deal of weight with consumers, and rightfully so.

Maximize Communication

Personalization Consider writing corporate communications as if you are writing to an individual that you know well, in terms of the tone and formality, or lack thereof. It goes without saying that your Internet-based correspondence should be personally addressed to each individual recipient using his/her first and/or last name, as appropriate. You might also consider signing such communications from your company CEO, and use only his/her first name to add a truly personal touch. In addition to seemingly personalized communications from the company CEO, let current and prospective members get to know other key players in the organization through similar departmentally appropriate direct communications, including email. Imagine an email being distributed to your company's customer database, addressed from the Member/Customer Services Manager, simply saying thanking him/her for the business and ensuring they know how to reach the company if they have a question, comment and/or concern. Moreover, consider banning autoresponder email, despite the potentially large amount of email-based correspondence received. Ensuring that each incoming query receives a one-on-one, personal reply will further establish trust, and satisfaction, with your users.

Show Your Sensitive Side

To build online trust, a company should be sensitive to the important, current issues of the day. Perhaps display an American flag icon throughout your site and/or publish content related to the company's philanthropic initiatives. There's no better way for a 100% online company to show their

"human" side than by connecting with their market in a profoundly meaningful and emotional way.

Catch A [Good] Virus

Among the better strategies toward establishing long-term relationships with visitors to your site is by "giving back" to them through programs employing incentives and rewards. Establishing viral marketing programs such as referral and affiliate programs that reward your customers and business partners, respectively, will go a long way in creating a sense of loyalty and appreciation toward your company that results in exponentially increasing first time, and return, traffic. In addition, there's no better endorsement a company can get than by someone's friend and/or family member, and it's a great way to earn someone's trust before they've yet to make contact with the company. Some will use a product/service solely on the recommendation of someone they know. As such, if it fits with your business model, establishing a referral program through which your satisfied customers/members can tell their colleagues, family members and friends about your company will help establish trust with prospects from the onset.

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/services. Or, your company might institute a series of weekly interactive online meetings that allows experts within your company to have direct, one-on-one communication with your customers, perhaps 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 with your staff and fellow customers that have been established through your site's interface.

Facilitate Real-Time Public Dialogue

If you're REALLY confident, consider establishing a company bulletin board system that allows current customers/members to anonymously post comments related to a specific topic, perhaps such as "How Are We Doing?" or "Member's Sound Off" or "Customer Q&A". The comments (threads) would remain archived and, while only paying members and/or current registers customers can post, prospective customers/members could "lurk" on the board to see unedited, unbiased commentary and in real-time. A company customer service representative would/should respond to all posts as necessary, with their comments also readily viewable. Of course, a staffer would have to moderate the board to ensure no profanity is used and that inappropriate postings are not left published, such as advertising, etc.

Simplify Lives

An effective strategy for maintaining a long-term relationship with customers is to establish and provide them with automated systems that simplify their lives and provide conveniences in whatever way is applicable for your offering. For example, eCommerce-oriented sites might consider setting up a program that allows customers to establish an online "automated purchase" account through which they can pre-select items that they use and purchase on an ongoing capacity, request that the company automatically send these item(s) to them each week/month/quarter, and automatically bill the credit card on file. This way, repeat customers don't have to pro actively go online to facilitate recurrent purchases that will simply automatically occur based on frequency, product and payment parameters he/she authorizes in advance. This automated eCommerce enhances the company's revenue stream and allows it to better forecast future revenue, inventory requirements, and other mission-critical issues while endearing the customer to its site by allowing easy and convenient "hands off" purchasing.

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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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