

Gelling the Old with the New

By Vivek Sabhachandani

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Vivek Sabhachandani
vls75@yahoo.com

No Site Listed <http://www.marketing-seek.com>

Even though the dot.com era has taken a welcome sabbatical from our computer screens, we still need to look at what caused the massive failure (other than way too much money being pumped into the industry) and assess our own business models. There were too many companies that had the perfect solution for a problem that did not exist, or a sales strategy for a market that was saturated. Having the latest state-of-the-art technology is wonderful, but as a friend of mine always asks, "Who is going to buy the darn thing?"

The old rules still apply

As the venture capitalists rushed to throw money at any dot.com that walked through their door, we began to see a supposedly new business model. ROI and profits were no longer the criteria for a successful business, it was the number of "eyeballs" or hits. In the "rush to market" syndrome everyone, including the VCs, never thought to ask if there was a market for the proposed business.

So now we go back to basics. Market research is back in vogue. Today, a new company needs a well-defined message and a focused approach to a specific market segment. Market testing, beta products and focus groups are now cool again. The "brick and mortar" companies that the Internet was going to put out of business knew this all along. Marketing itself has not changed, only the tools. The old rules still apply.

Two marketing developments unique to the dot.com era are speed and diversity. With the push of the Enter key, or a click of the Send button, we can deliver our message to an unlimited number of recipients - instantly. We can point people to a specific Web page that we can instantly change to alter the message. We can seamlessly capture demographic information and use this for future marketing. And we can do all this quickly.

Efficiency is not so relevant. Whether we send 1,000 or 10,000 emails, the cost is nowhere near that of postage. Developing a new email campaign is far less costly than designing a print mailing. One major email marketing company (responsys.com) estimates a 10-15% response rate with targeted email campaigns in the B2B arena vs. 1-2% for direct mail. This is a cost per lead of \$5.00 vs. \$40.00. So where do people fail in the use of this new electronic delivery medium? With nothing but a keyboard it has become too easy to produce a mixed marketing message, which we can call "diarrhea of the computer," or the acronym, dot.com.

Stay focused with your message

Do not try to be all things to all people. We learned this in Marketing-101. Talk to your target audience. Define your company and your Unique Selling Principal (USP) right on your home page. This is the hook to get the viewer into your site. In the few seconds before their finger hits the mouse again, you need to capture their interest.

On subsequent pages, provide just enough information to define your company but do not "give away the store." There must be enough of a void in your presentation so people will want to contact you for more information. Keep the message short and focused. Don't forget the call to action. You want people to contact you so tell them and tell them how. Is it the techie Web designers who do not understand this? I am still amazed at how many sites make it so difficult to contact the company.

Solve problems

Features and Benefits are so... '60s. Who cares? We are on information overload. People have problems that need to be solved. Provide problem/solution scenarios for people to look at. If you define a problem your site visitor has, that person will spend more time on your site. Testimonials put some muscle behind your punch. If you document how your service or product has helped solve problems other have had, then you have defined your USP for others to look at.

One interesting method of providing problem solving solutions is to document case studies. Define the problem, then what you and/or your company did to solve the problem. My "soap box sermon" is that the Internet is still entertainment - so entertain your visitor. Create an index page with a short description of the case study with a "more" link to the full text on a secondary page. Give your viewers the option to look at them, don't force them to. Be sure to give them a direct link back. Coincidentally, while you are entertaining your viewer, you are showing that you care about his or her experience on your site. This is good marketing.

Understand why people buy

People buy for three reasons; need, desire, and emotion. "I need a new car. The \$25,000 model will do fine. I would really like the \$45,000 model I just saw. But then, why not go for the \$75,000 car my brother-in-law just bought?" The sales pitch for the less expensive cars all tout safety, fuel economy and price. As we escalate the price range from "need" to "desire," the pitch changes from the basic features to luxury. At the "emotion" level, it is pure performance. When developing a Web site, you need to know where you and your company are in this buying chain. Just compare a site like Amazon.com with any of the automobile manufacturers. Amazon wants your dollars NOW! The automobile manufacturers are trying to WOW you into a showroom.

Know your audience

When preparing a printed mailer or brochure it is easy to tailor your message to the proposed reader. If you are soliciting the CEO, it is one message. If you are soliciting the IT manager it is a different message. Busy CEO's will rarely surf the Internet, whereas middle management and IT people tend to surf more. The challenge lies in the fact that content on a Web site must appeal to a broad audience but not turn people away. The CEO needs to know how your product or service will affect his or her business and the IT manager wants to know that the technical implementation will coexist with the current legacy system. If your business model appeals to a customer in-between, you still have the same problem, just with different players.

The prudent Web developer will address both sides of the message and tactfully take each viewer into a section of the site that divulges information relevant to their needs. One side may show the problem/solution scenarios and case studies; whereas the other side may address the technical aspect. Even the testimonials can be different so they address the specific audience.

Talk to the decision maker

When making a sales call, the receptionist may love your product but that person does not control the purse strings. A successful sales person will always find a way to get to the decision maker. This is totally a "push" tactic. As a sales person, you control the process. On a Web site you need to use "pull" tactics to get the decision maker to buy into what you are selling. Your objective is to be persuasive enough for this person to contact you for more information. "Sales is the process of converting a person to your way of thinking." On a person-to-person basis, this is much easier than on a Web site.

Six basic steps to a successful Web site:

- 1) Define your USP right on the home page - who you are, what you do, what you provide and why. Talk about the business problems you solve, not the features and benefits of your product or company.
- 2) Prepare an outline detailing the organization of the Web site. Walk yourself through the outline so you see and understand what other people will be looking at. This will help define the navigation system.
- 3) Keep the copy short. Remember, people do not like to scroll, but they will follow links. It's still entertainment. Scrolling is repetitive - clicking is mysterious. Create separate sections for articles, white papers and technical documents. This is where you archive your long, wordy text documents.
- 4) Place a call to action on every page, "How can we help you?" Give people a way to contact you on every page. If you make it difficult for people to contact you, they won't!
- 5) Have several people proofread the content and test the navigation. Typos are easy to fix and text is easy to change, but if people cannot easily navigate the site you will lose them completely.
- 6) Stay focused on your USP and your target customer at all times.

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