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# **101 Ways To Improve Your Business Web Site**

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by  
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# 101 Ways to Improve Your Business Web Site

by Gary A. Witt, Ph.D.

## *Introduction*

Hello, and welcome to this book of 101 ways to improve your business Web site.

Chances are you have a site that is not performing up to your expectations. In fact, you may be losing money on it. Over 80% of e-commerce sites are not making money! That is not a club you want to join.

How do you avoid it? There are a lot of specific ideas in this book, but I think the most fundamental concept to remember is this: **Buying happens in the mind of your customer. That is where your focus should be.**

You probably had a psychology course in school. You know that people's behavior is influenced by many factors. Most of them center around one question: "*What's in it for me?*" That's the question you need to ask at every decision point in creating and marketing your Web site -- what's in it for my customers? How will they react? What will persuade them? You'll find that most of the traditional rules of marketing still apply. In the store or on the Web, buying still begins in the mind.

In this book, you'll learn how to get inside their minds and discover the four types of buying motivators which drive buying decisions. And you'll learn how to use those key motives in designing and marketing your Web site.

In the relationship between buyer and seller, everything ultimately comes down to psychology -- how they think and feel about you and your offer. In the Web marketing channel, where live people have been replaced by electrons, knowing how to mold every aspect of your electronic message is the difference between success and failure. I hope this book helps you in that quest.

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## **Section One: Goals and Purpose of Your Web Site**

### **Can you clearly state your goals and purpose for having a Web site?**

Owning a Web site is like owning tractor. If you don't know what you want it for, you shouldn't get it in the first place. Many small businesses now believe that if they don't have a Web site, they're 'second class' companies. And, in fact, in the minds of many Web users, that's the case. For a growing number of people, the Web is the first place they look for information, including facts about businesses they may want to patronize.

Write down all the reasons why you think you need a Web site. Now, on a separate page, write down all the reasons your potential customers may want to visit your Web page. Compare the lists, and circle the matches. There's a good chance those are the legitimate goals you may have for owning a site. If they seem like strong enough reasons, you should proceed. If not, give Cyberspace some more thought -- there's more than enough useless clutter out there already.

### **Are your goals realistic in today's marketplace?**

Take a hard look at your industry and your current marketplace. Are their economies trending up, down or sideways? What are the newest developing trends? What products and services are drying up, and which ones are starting to get "hot"? Don't just think about the answers. Write them down.

Now look at your own business. Where are you on each of those trend lines? Got any 'hot' or emerging products or services? What's drying up? Give it a careful, objective analysis.

The goals you've set for your Web site should realistically fit into your analysis. If your goal is to sell a hundred thousand widgets online, but your brand of widgets is an old, tired product just waiting to die, your goal may not be realistic. Worn out horses seldom run better on new race tracks.

### **Does the site reflect the goals you've set for it?**

If you already have a Web site, does it reflect your goals for it? Let's say your goal is to sell original photos online. If your site doesn't encourage visitors to buy and make it easy for them to do, then your site does not reflect your goal. On the other hand, it would if your goal was to create a personalized online art gallery.

Web sites may have many different purposes -- information, sales, branding, lead gathering, etc. Each purpose(s) reflects a goal you have for the site. Look closely at your site. Does it appear the site is designed to fulfill those goals? Does it state on the home page what types of information it contains? Does it ask visitors for their e-mail address on several pages? Does it promote your product with power? Does it emphasize the brand name and associate it with a strong image? Each goal requires different design elements. One size definitely does NOT fit all purposes!

Whatever your goals, be sure the site is specifically designed to fit them, not some general, nebulous goal of 'doing business on the Internet.'

### **Does the site reflect the overall marketing goals of the company?**

As you set your marketing goals for your Web site, don't forget that all business goals should work in harmony toward a central purpose, such as more profits and growth. If your Web site's goals are not focused on those same goals, it isn't doing as much for you as it could.

### **Is your Web site marketing strategy integrated into your overall marketing strategy?**

Your Web site may seem like an exotic animal to you, but at its heart, it is just a powerful new marketing channel. It's easy to forget that your Web marketing plan should be integrated into your current, "offline" marketing strategy. The Web can leverage your marketing dollars by increasing the reach of your message at a much lower cost. But if your Web message is not 'on point' with the rest of your marketing, its impact will be reduced.

How can you integrate it? Look at the core messages of your business. What image and ideas are you trying to put in your customers' minds? If you advertise on radio, you know that you must create radio ads that rely on words and word pictures, ones targeted for the specific audience of that station. You took a core message and adapted it for the strong and weak points of the medium.

Approach your Web marketing strategy the same way. Look at its strong and weak points, such as the ability to personalize and the difficulty of real-time interaction with individual customers. Tailor your strongest messages and image-building ideas to fit the Web. Be sure that all of your marketing channels are hitting the same nail (your selling points), just with different hammers. Good integration of online and offline marketing is a key to e-commerce success.

### **Can visitors easily tell the purpose of your site?**

You have a clear purpose for your site. And when you look at the site, you can see it. But what about other people? Is it as readily as apparent to them? Remember when you were a teenager with acne? Every little pimple seemed to leap out from the mirror. But other people just didn't notice most of them. It just wasn't important to them.

Your Web site's purpose is like that. You're so involved with it, and think about it every day, so naturally everything about it seems clear, simple, and easy. That's why it is so important to look at every decision you make through your customers' eyes.

Ask some other people to look at your homepage and tell you what the purpose of your site is. Ask them to tell you why they think that. You may find some big surprises.

## Section Two: Planning Your Site

### **Is the site designed to satisfy your targeted customers' buying motives?**

The two most dangerous assumptions of most Internet marketers are

- (a) "If I built it, they will come." And
- (b) "Everyone is my customer."

They won't come unless you have a strong online and offline marketing program -- one that promises them something they want. And once they show up in your 'virtual store,' they must believe at once that you really do have what they want.

People want different things, even when buying the same product. Teenage girls want something different in jeans than seniors do. If you tried to sell girls by using the same pitch you successfully used for seniors, it wouldn't work.

So why would you think your Web site will do any better with a "one size fits all" approach?

Marketing Psychology shows you the way. Here's a summary of the four basic steps:

**First:** Figure out who you want as customers. List specific groups, like "elderly men in Arizona."

**Second:** Analyze their motivations for buying your product or service (they don't want your product, but the physical and psychological benefits it can create! For example, a Corvette is not just a means of transportation for young men. It is a way to go fast and look cool.)

**Third:** Determine the features of your product that promise them what they want, e.g. "Sleek styling," "0 to 60 is 6 seconds."

**Fourth:** Design your Web site, and especially your home page, to stimulate their buying motives, then promise you can satisfy them.

Remember, "Buying begins in the Mind of your customer." Start there.

### **Have you carefully psycho-analyzed each of the target buyer groups you want to attract, using both demographic and psychographic analysis?**

This is the heart and soul of a successful Web adventure. If you don't intimately understand each of your buyer classes, and why they want to buy your type of product or service, you are at a serious disadvantage in the globally competitive Internet marketplace.

One of the biggest mistakes most businesses make is to assume they "know" their customers. Often what they know is their demographics -- personal attributes like age, sex, education, race, etc. What you create with demographics is a picture. And you cannot market to a photo. You just don't know enough about a photo to know why that person would buy. Thumb through any magazine until you come to a photo of a person who has the same demographic attributes as your customers. Now figure out how to sell them your product by looking at their photo. You'll find yourself guessing a lot -- not a wise basis for marketing decisions.

You should look carefully at the "psychographic" attributes of EACH of your target customer groups. Most of them will be different. 'Psychographic' attributes are what they think

and feel. A part of it is their values, part is their aspirations. A big part is how they see the world through their eyeballs, and what they want from it.

We've found that one effective way to do psychographic analysis of customer classes is to look at four types of buying motivations: Their Needs, Wants, Fears and Desires. We use special tests to investigate these buying motivations for each group, but you can do a rough approximation yourself.

If you can, talk to some of your customers over coffee. Ask them questions like . . .

- \* What are the critical features of our product or service for you?
- \* What are the features you are most happy to have, even if they aren't critical?
- \* If you were to seriously consider buying a similar product from a company you'd never heard of, what would be some of the things that would be of most concern to you, the things you'd worry about before buying?
- \* What kinds of problems could you possibly run into with your [boss, partners, stockholders, employees] if you made the wrong choice?
- \* If you were to really make a great deal on a product like ours, what kind of reactions might you hope for or expect from your [boss, partners, stockholders, employees]? Other than your company making more money, what other kinds of good things could conceivably happen to you?

As you can see, these questions are probing for both facts and emotions. Most purchases made by human beings are based on a combination of both. Often customers make a buying decision based on emotion (something they hope to feel), and then use facts to justify it to themselves and others. Preferences for musical artists are a good example, especially among teens.

Here's the real buying/selling proposition on the Web or in the store -- people want to satisfy a set of important emotional and cognitive (rational) motivations, so they buy products which have attributes which seem to promise that satisfaction.

Take perfume or cologne. Women don't need it. And they certainly don't want to pay fifty to one hundred dollars for it. And they don't. They aren't paying that money for the scent. They're paying for the hope that they'll find romance or keep their mate. When asked, they justify the purchase by explaining they want to "feel feminine." In essence, perfume advertising taps into the same buying motivations as lottery tickets -- a chance to win big. [Men exhibit the same sort of behaviors for other products, including hair restoration, fast cars, and certain sporting goods.]

After you've talked to your customers, do some serious thinking. Put yourself in the "shoes" they've described. See your company, products and services through their eyes. Does your site seem to promise it can satisfy their buying motives, their needs, wants, fears and desires? When you can see the hidden reins that are guiding their decisions, you'll know how to sell them what they want.

## **Have you carefully psycho-analyzed your products and services?**

Knowing what they REALLY want to buy is only half the battle. The other half is in understanding what you are really selling. It isn't your product or service. And that's good, because they don't want it anyway.

To have the best chance of selling your company, products, services, and image on the Web, you must know which of their many features and attributes are the most important to buyers.

What if a new perfume manufacturer thought that having a non-breakable bottle was important because they guessed that safety was an important consideration for women (as it is with kitchen products -- one reason so many of them now come in plastic containers)? The manufacturer would emphasize the wrong feature in its ads ("*New Seduction come in a non-breakable plastic bottle with a safety grip!*"), and the perfume would fail, no matter how good it might be. (Over 500 new perfumes are introduced each year, and the vast majority of them don't last two years.)

How do you analyze your products? Write down every feature and attribute (things you can't see, like "quality" or "durability") you and your employees can think of. Put them into one of these four categories:

- \* Concrete -- things you can see, touch, smell, hear or taste.
- \* Abstract -- attributes, usually based on judgments, like "*exciting*" or "*conservative*"
- \* Functional -- what it does ("*zero to sixty in 5.6 seconds.*")
- \* Psychosocial -- attributes related to people's social reaction (a Mont Blanc pen is high status; a Geo is not.)

Once you have this list, you can readily see how to meet the buying motivations of your target groups. (For example, if a mother's key concern is the safety of her young children, she will lean toward kitchen cleaners that are antibacterial.)

## **Have you carefully psycho-analyzed your company's image with target buyers?**

Every company has an image with potential buyers. For most companies, it is simply "*I've never heard of them,*" or "*a vanilla, cookie-cutter company like a hundred others selling the same thing.*"

Image is an important part of your marketing message. If you know your customers' image of you and your product, your messages can reinforce its positive parts, and downplay the negative parts.

For example, Forrester Research has a reputation as a premier Web research firm. They play to that image by charging very high prices and giving away very little information, thus reinforcing the image of exclusivity. They are the Ritz Carlton of Web researchers. On the other hand, Cyberatlas has a more middle class reputation, the Marriott of research sites, which they reinforce by giving away research information done by other firms.

Ask your customers what their image is of your company and your products. Ask them to equate a hotel chain or a retail chain store with their image of your firm (are you like Saks or K-Mart in their eyes?) Ask them to give you three or four adjectives that describe your image in their mind. It needn't be objective. Images are not objective. They're personal opinions.

Those opinions are often created, in part, by the advertising and other marketing messages the company puts out. McDonald's has spent several billion dollars over the years to

create a powerful image of a place for families to enjoy being together in an atmosphere of fun, food and friendly service (think of all the laughing moms and kids you've seen in their ads, enjoying each other as they enjoy their Big Mac.) Families want to buy the image and the promised experience as much or more than they want to buy the burgers. The food is just the 'springboard' for having the experience.

Don't play against your image. It can hurt you. There's a new soup line, for example, named for a famous chef, that sells in the mid-price range, despite its fancy, high-end types of soup. The modest price works against the image, hurting the brand. People think, "If it was really a great soup, it would sell for more." Instead, its price positions it against several mid range soup brands, and its image, like a fading movie queen appearing in B-movies, puts it in a weakened competitive posture.

Lesson: Know what your image is. Work to modify it to a more positive image by emphasizing its strong points and downplaying its weak ones. Don't create any messages (including price) that work against your image goals.

### **Have you carefully psycho-analyzed your product category's image with target buyers?**

By now you're probably saying, enough with this analysis. Let's get on to the actual Web site. But that's like General Colin Powell saying, "Let's stop all this planning for Desert Storm and just send in the Marines." Its planning and analysis that give soldiers the best chance of winning wars, and its planning and research that give e-commerce sites the best chance of whipping the competition.

Nearly every product is a member of a category or class of products or services. McDonald's, for example, is part of the fast food industry. What's your image of the fast food industry? That image plays an important part in planning their marketing strategy. Why? Because it tells them the things that people are concerned about in any fast food restaurant, not just McDonald's (e.g., images of the fast food industry could include "high in fat," "plain dining areas," "quick service," etc.)

Knowing your product category's reputation allows you to do two things: First, if you have some positive feature which is far superior to the standard for the industry, you can try to gain competitive advantage by emphasizing it. McDonald's tried this with its McLean burger that was lower in fat (which didn't sell.) Second, you can latch on to the most positive images of the industry and emphasize them for your particular product. All the burger chains, for example, regularly emphasize how fast you get your food, especially on television where they can just show cars zipping through the drive-thru.

You can categorize your industry's image in just the same way you did the features of your product -- concrete, abstract, functional, and psychosocial. This analysis will often suggest one or two great marketing promises, and reveal one or two 'land mines' you may have overlooked (like diners' concern about bacteria in their fast food burgers.)

**Have you carefully determined the very best brand, company and industry features and attributes to emphasize to each target buyer group?**

This is the payoff, the place on your worksheet where you write down all of the most important features, attributes and images from the analysis of your product, brand category, company, and industry.

Once you have the list, look back at the KEY buying motives for each one of your target buyer groups. For each one, list the features, attributes and images which you can emphasize to promise the satisfactions they crave. For example, if a man's real buying motivations for purchasing a sports car is to 'go fast' and 'look cool,' you can emphasize the Corvette's sleek styling, fast acceleration, and world-class image as the premier sports car. And you'll know enough not to mention its limited seating or its high maintenance costs.

## **Section Three: Your Web Site Content**

### **Does the site seem to be information rich?**

Research shows that most people visit Web sites for information. This is especially true for adults. Information-rich sites score highest on “must bookmark” and “will return” scales. Those are two critical factors for creating new and repeat business.

An ‘information-rich’ site is one which provides helpful ideas, facts, recommendations, stories, humor, entertainment, games, contests, and other content which visitors will find interesting. The opposite of an ‘information-rich’ site is one which does nothing but pitch your product or service.

### **Does the information meet the specific interests of your targeted visitors?**

Of course, not all information is created equal. You might find a site that is rich in information about baby diapers, but if you don’t have a baby, chances are it won’t make it onto your bookmarks.

You have specialized knowledge about your field that most of your customers don’t know, and may be interested in learning. You also have access to others with additional information, through your trade magazines, contacts, and industry reports. Be on the lookout for interesting and valuable information which you can share with visitors. Be sure that you get rid of the industry jargon and the ideas that would only be of interest to someone in the business. You’ll still find a lot that will help make your site information rich, and bookmarkable.

### **Is your copy written in a style your visitors want?**

In a few years English majors will begin to write dissertations on the ways in which the Internet has changed how we express ourselves. Over 87% of people who use the Internet send e-mails. Remember, these are the same people who, only two or three years ago, would seldom compose a letter. Now kids who never wrote their mom are sending regular e-mails. Business executives who told secretaries or assistants to ‘fire off a letter’ are now doing it themselves. And their lack of experience in expressing themselves “on paper” is starting to show.

While writing seems so easy that ‘anyone can do it,’ effective writing is not easy to create. The most effective writing is composed to fit the way readers will process it. A formal letter from the IRS will be carefully read, while a sales pitch from a new company will just receive a glance or two.

Because your Web site visitors are on a mission to find the answers they seek, they will not read your site’s copy carefully, at least not at first. Instead, they are scanners. They practice their Evelyn Woodhead speed reading skills on your words, skimming over them searching for key words and phrases that will tell them you have part of the answer they want.

The formal styles you were taught in school don’t seem to work well on the Web. Paragraph after paragraph stretching down the page, each with complete sentences, isn’t the best style for skimmers. Be sure your style helps them skim -- use short paragraphs, short sentences, bullet points, bold key words and phrases, underline, highlight with color, use all

caps (sparingly), italics, boxes, and lots of white space. Make each page inviting to enter, and gives the appearance that its contents will be easy to scan and digest.

### **Is the writing easy to understand?**

Good style and inviting layout cannot make up for bad writing. Your goal in writing is not to impress (your site shouldn't sound like those people you sometimes meet who use big words to impress you). Your goal should be to convey ideas in a simple and clear manner to your visitors. The best advice you can follow is that of Winston Churchill, who said, "*Old words are best. Old words, when they are short words, are best of all.*" Churchill won the Nobel Prize in Literature, so he knew what he was talking about.

### **Is it written in an interesting way?**

If it isn't from the IRS, the bank, or a personal letter from Ed McMahon, people don't have an inherent interest in it. That means it isn't enough to say "Here's what we can do for you..." even in old, short words. Those old, short words must be put together in an interesting way -- such as a story, a word picture, with a hook into the readers' lives and dreams, etc.

Remember, you and your visitors have two different outlooks. You want them to become customers, but all they want is to satisfy a set of pressing motivations. Your outlook has this assumption: "*If I offer them a good deal, they'll buy from me.*" That assumption leads to the idea that all you have to do is present your pitch in a clear way. But their outlook has this assumption: "*I'll know the right deal because it will seem so great.*" That assumption leads them to believe the right store will make them FEEL like it can satisfy them.

See the problem? If your approach is "Just the facts, ma'am," your pitch won't sing to them, won't make them feel like you can satisfy them. Every good salesman will tell you that customers don't buy the facts, they buy the story. They feel what it would be like to drive around in a new Cadillac, or shoot a great round of golf, or have a handsome man tell them they look gorgeous.

To sell the story, it must be written in an interesting way. People like stories. They like dialog, and 'insider information' and 'how to' information. Look for a way to turn your meat-and-potatoes facts into a gourmet story. It will pay off at the cash register.

### **Does the site tell visitors that the company recognizes their motives for dropping in, and wants to help?**

If you are looking for a special pair of shoes, what do you want to see first when you approach a shoe store? A sign that says "*We have a huge variety of styles and sizes.*" That sign tells you that they know the shoes you want will not be like most other women's, they must be in a particular style and size. It also tells you that their big selection gives you a good chance of finding what you want.

Your Web site is like a shoe store. Your visitors are looking for special information. And they won't stay one second longer than they have to if they don't think you've got it. After all, some other store is just on the other side of that click.

This is one reason it is important to have a detailed psychographic description of your buyers' motivations. Knowing their key motives clues you to what to say at the top of your homepage. For example, if they want to grow their business, your first words might be "*Looking*

*for some great ways to grow your business? You're in the right place! We have hundreds of them!"*

### **Do you clarify any terms or ideas that may not be familiar to some visitors?**

Many industries have jargon, abbreviations, and slang that people in those businesses get used to using every day. The Internet industry is a prime example. Not many people know what a 'server' is, or 'HTML.' And 'cache' just looks like a misspelling. It's easy to forget the words which are so familiar to you are like Greek to others.

Look over your copy, and get others to also. If any word, phrase or idea might be unknown to the most naive of your targeted visitors, then offer an explanation. One easy way is to imitate Microsoft and provide a "What's This" question mark which pops up a definition box when it is placed over the puzzling word.

### **Are your page headlines exciting and focused on the visitor's needs?**

Each page of your Web site should have a headline. It doesn't need to be in the newspaper headline style like "Man Finds Rembrandt at Yard Sale." But it should be a few words or a sentence in larger type which immediately tells visitors to that page what it is about. Headlines should follow Churchill's advice and use "*old, short words.*"

Those words should be focused on the visitor's motives -- why they might have decided to take a look. For example, to you the shipping department packs and sends out orders. So you might think the headline should be "Our Shipping Department." But visitors don't give a hoot about your shipping department. What they want to know is 'where is my order?' or 'How long will it take to get here?' or 'How is it being sent?' They want to see a headline like "Shipping Your Order." That focuses on their motives for visiting the page.

### **Does the site stimulate specific motivations in the visitor, then offer to satisfy them with information or products?**

Imagine you are walking along in a mall, minding your own business, thinking about the birthday present you're going to buy. Suddenly, as you walk by a store, you are enveloped in the heavenly smell of hot cinnamon buns. How do you react? Most people's first reaction is the thought: "*A hot cinnamon bun would sure taste good!*" But five seconds before that, eating a cinnamon bun was the farthest thing from your mind.

Think that piping the smell out into the mall sells many buns? Of course it does. Why? Because the store didn't just offer passersby a sign reading "Cinnamon Buns." It first stimulated a powerful hunger motivation first with the smell. Once target buyers have the motivation to eat a cinnamon bun, they start looking around for a way to satisfy that motivation - and what do you know, there's a Cinnamon Buns Are Us shop right there! So in they go, the rest of their shopping forgotten until that motivation is satisfied.

Lesson: You sell more when you stimulate the buying motivation in your customers before trying to sell them your product. Not during, and certainly not after. Before.

The homepage of a Web site should do the same -- stimulate the motives you know (from your research) your target visitors have. Once they're hungry for what you are selling, it's a lot easier to make the sale. Of course, you can't pipe out smells (yet), but you can create word pictures, show images, and use key words that remind them of what they really want

(success, wealth, popularity, youth, intellect, status, and so on.) Try to stimulate a feeling, then promise to satisfy it at the top of your homepage.

### **Does the site allow visitors to rate the information, the products, etc. for others to see?**

Remember we discussed the importance of an 'information-rich' site? Well, one of the components of a site which many visitors really like is the chance to read what others think about your products, and to express their own opinions. Take a look at Amazon.com. You can read book reviews written by 'people like you.' Sites like AllExperts.com give people the opportunity to rate how helpful their expert was, then provide a overall numerical score for that expert which others can check before selecting the expert the want to ask.

If your product or service lends itself to this sort of thing, its worth considering. It makes your site more interactive, and the good things past clients say about you will increase your future sales. If you do this, be sure to ask every satisfied client to participate.

### **Does your site change regularly, adding new and updated content?**

People will revisit sites more often if they believe it continues to be a rich source of helpful information. Try to add new information, tips, ideas, articles, games, or whatever your audience likes at least once a week, and preferably every day.

One handy way to create the impression of a constantly updated site is to use code which will put today's date near the top of your home page.

When you add something new, publicize it on your home page, and put a "New" sticker on it to attract your visitors' eyeballs.

If you have numerous banners and other advertising on the same page as an article, visitors appreciate the option of "print version" so they can get the text without printing out the ads.

One way to get regular new content without spending a lot of time creating it is to invite other people to submit articles or tips to you. In exchange for a credit and a link to their Web site or e-mail, you get new information that will keep your visitors coming back. You can also ask to reprint articles you find in newspapers, magazines or newsletters (printed and online). Often the smaller, more specialized ones will grant you a one-time right.

### **Do you offer content in other languages?**

Roughly 50% of online users today live in the U.S. By 2003 that percentage is estimated to drop to 42%. In other words, millions of new users are coming online. Both Europe and Asia's users are expected to triple by 2005, and Latin America's could jump by 600%!

As more users begin surfing the Web, more businesses from those continents will also set up shop in cyberspace. Yes, they will be your competitors; but you will be theirs, too.

To have the best chance at getting customers from other lands, your site should provide information in their native language. Yes, English is now the accepted language of the Web, but that doesn't mean much to a fellow in Hong Kong looking for barbeque sauce. Research shows that people are much more likely to buy from a site that is in their own language. Makes sense. How many Americans would buy from a site selling Volkswagens that was written in German?

Which languages do you need? Experts recommend Spanish, German, French and Japanese. You don't have to do every page, but at least offer your key pages in various languages if you want to attract an international market. Also, add a currency converter so they will know how much your \$29.95 "*Best of Elvis*" CD is in their money.

**Does your foreign-language content reflect the culture and outlook of its targeted visitors?**

One word of extreme caution. The annals of marketing are overflowing with disaster stories of companies that tried to sell abroad using an American approach. From product names that meant something unfortunate in another language (Chevy's Nova meant "no go" in Spanish), to translations of product slogans that were just plain embarrassing (Perdue chickens' billboard in Spanish read "*It takes a hard man to arouse a chicken*"), the lessons of the past are very clear -- hire local talent to write your copy and advertising. They know the idioms, the culture, and what's 'hot' in that country. They even know what colors to use and stay away from (in Japan, white is the color of death.)

Never think you'll save a buck by using a translation dictionary or hiring your partner's daughter who was a Spanish major in college. You will pay dearly for your cheapness in the long run.

Be sure to get in-country talent to help you understand the buying motivations of your target customers there. Those buyers also hope to satisfy distinct needs, wants, fears and desires with your product. The more you understand what their REAL motivations, the better chance you have to sell them. Don't assume you know what they are just because you've analyzed a comparable demographic group in the U.S.!

## **Section Four: Branding**

### **Does the name of the site help brand it?**

Your company's URL (www.yourcompany.com) is a billboard for your product or company. If the billboard is confusing or meaningless, you've lost a great branding opportunity.

According to NFO Interactive Research, 62% of Internet users get to a site by typing in the company's name followed by .com. If you don't have a URL that will lead those people to your site, you're missing a lot of potential customers.

Another value to having your company name, or your product name, as your URL is that it creates stronger memories. Psychological research shows that the more times a person writes out a name, the better it will be remembered. After typing or clicking on the name of your site a few times, they'll know it by heart.

### **Is your brand name clear and obvious on the homepage, above the fold?**

If your shoe store sold Nikes, the most popular brand of athletic footwear, would you be sure to tell people by posting a sign out front saying "We carry the newest Nikes"? Sure you would. Your Web site is no different. Let them know on your homepage, "above the fold" (newspaper talk for the top half of your homepage), who you are and what you carry.

This is especially important if you are trying to establish your company's brand name. Don't let visitors overlook it. The more times they see it, the stronger their memory of it, and the more likely they will recall your company when they need widgets.

### **Do the first dozen words of the homepage help brand the company in the visitor's mind?**

A brand name is more than just a name. It is an image, a feeling, a short description in the buyer's mind. Gillette is the men's razor blade company (one reason Gillette had such trouble extending its brand to women's products). Xerox is the copier company (one reason they couldn't sell computers). And Sara Lee is the frozen desert company (one reason they couldn't sell entrees).

People are more comfortable buying from companies they feel they 'know.' Having an image of that company is one of the important aspects of creating that feeling. If you want your visitors to have an image of your company, make sure you help them create the proper one.

How? By telling them who you are and what you stand for. Pepsi stands for youth. McDonald's stands for family fun.

What do you want your brand to stand for? If you don't know, you sure can't tell them. Once you do know, tell them in the first few dozen words of your home page. In fact, think of a catchy slogan and paste it just below your company name on every page, like Xerox does with their "*the document company*" slogan, or GE used to with their "*progress is our most important product*" slogan.

**Does the site contain components that enhance the company's image, and build confidence in its products?**

Have you ever looked for the AAA sign outside motels? Or the BBB Member logo in yellow page ads? We are so used to shoddy service that we look to others to help us sort out the good from the mediocre, and the crooked! A product with the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval could sell millions of additional units just because the trusted Good Housekeeping magazine people had said it was OK.

The Internet is like Wall Street when it began, with people hanging about on street corners offering 'hot tip' stocks from inside their coat pockets. Worse, now we can't even see the salesmen, only their slick Web site. Its no wonder that more online shoppers are looking for trusted third parties to help them decide. It's one reason people like to read comments from other customers on your Web site.

But even more than that, they like to see some agency who will vouch for you. The BBB now offers a Web seal of approval, as does Trust-e.com and some others. It's worth going through the lengthy process and paying the fees (a few hundred dollars a year) to prove to your visitors that you aren't a shady character.

## **Section Five: Navigation**

### **Are the navigation options easily found on each page?**

Chances are the information most visitors want will not be on your homepage. If they can't find your navigation tools, they can't find what they want. It has become common, and therefore expected, that your navigation tools will be on the left side of each page. Many companies also put popular or common destinations at the top, too. Amazon is a good example. They've got a complete navigation package on the left, and a half dozen popular page destinations at the top.

If you have a lot of different options available, consider showing subheadings under your major navigation options, or using drop down menus for each one. Don't make visitors look for your navigation tools. They won't. They'll just leave.

### **Are the meaning of all your navigation options clear?**

Research shows one of the biggest reasons people bail out of a site is its navigation. They just get confused, frustrated, and mad. Not the sort of feelings that will promote a second visit. While most Web site owners recognize they need navigation tools to help visitors move around, they fail to look at the terms they use through the eyes of new visitors.

The biggest problems? (1) Not enough navigation tools, and (2) unclear terms.

Both problems make your visitors guess the right path to the information they want -- like trying to guess under which of three cups the magician has hidden a ball. Visitors don't like unpleasant surprises, like guessing wrong, and they don't like to waste time. Unclear navigation makes them very unhappy. So unhappy they're glad to leave.

The biggest reason that navigation tools are confusing is that you so clearly understand the layout of your site. That leads to bad assumptions, like "*Of course they'll know what FAQ means*" or "*Everybody knows what the Fulfillment area is.*"

This is easy to correct, once you realize you may have a problem. Just ask some friends who have no knowledge of your business to carefully examine your site. Give them some destinations, like "find out what the status of your order is," or "find out what's on special this week." Pretty soon you'll discover the hidden 'navigation land mines' in your site. To correct them, just use those old, short words that mean something to your visitors. Write for them, not for you.

### **Does the site direct visitors to the page where their specific motivations can be quickly satisfied? Or must visitors roam around looking for the right place?**

It isn't enough to have obvious and clear navigation tools. They must also be written for the visitor's needs. If I want to know the price of a new Dell computer, I don't want to hunt through several pages to find it, no matter how clearly those pages are named. What I want is a page whose name addresses MY needs -- "Prices."

The best way to do this is to ask a few of your friends and customers to look at a list of your navigation tools. Ask them what sorts of questions they might have when visiting your site, and whether the navigation tools offered are the right ones for their needs. They'll tell you

pretty fast what you're missing, and what you're doing right. Listen to them, and fix your navigation tools accordingly.

### **Is there a homepage “search” option for visitors who know what they want?**

Most visitors are pressed for time. They don't have much patience. Many of them know exactly the information they want. For them, it is helpful to have a little search engine just for your site. They type in a keyword, and bingo, they are taken right to the place they want to be. Now that's the way to create a feeling of professional customer service!

The HTML code for these little search routines can be found for free at many sites on the Web. A good place to start looking for it, and many other cool things, is [www.resourceindex.com](http://www.resourceindex.com).

### **Does the basic navigation bar remain on all pages? Are there any deadend pages with navigation options?**

Don't ever abandon a visitor, leaving him with only the “back” button to escape a page (although a remarkably large number of people regularly use it to navigate from a page, back to home, to a new page, etc.!) Put your navigation tools on every page, at the same place on the page. And be sure all the links work! People just hate to click on a dead link.

### **Does the site offer basic navigation options at the bottom of long pages?**

Some sites have very long pages. The navigation buttons you've kindly set out are no longer visible at the bottom end of those pages. What's their alternative? They have to scroll up! Ugh. Help them out by providing some basic navigation links at the bottom of long pages. They'll think better of you for your thoughtfulness.

### **Can visitors get to where they want to be within 3 clicks?**

Visitors will give you two or three clicks to get them to the information they want. Then they will try someplace else. Can they get to any page on your site in two or three clicks? If not, fix the problem. One way is to use more navigation options, or give them a drop down menu when their cursor moves over each of your basic navigation options.

### **Does the site easily lead visitors to the next place they need to go?**

Many visitors start by going to a page that sounds like it might have the information they want. But if the information is more specialized, it may be found on another, related page. Make it easy for them to figure out which page option to choose next. Make it very clear what type of information each new page contains. To write effective text about what each page contains, try to look at your site through their eyes, with their motivations.

If they want to know the over-the-counter medicine to take just after a possible heart attack to minimize brain damage, don't hide it in a page described as ‘treatments,’ of ‘physiology of the event.’ Call it something like ‘medicines for heart attacks’ or ‘reduce brain damage.’ That's their motivation for visiting you.

Remember, you can have more than one link tied to the same page. Ask yourself all of the different types of questions people might have that the information on that page could answer. Then create several different links that will take them there.

## **Section Six: Overall Look and Image**

### **Does the homepage look professional and attractive? Is it clean and neat, or cluttered and disorganized?**

When someone walks in to interview for a job, what's are the first things you notice? What they looks like, how they're dressed, whether they seem sloppy or neat. The person you're interviewing may be the greatest employee you could hire, but if the 'package' they present isn't attractive to you, you'll never find out. They won't get the chance to prove it.

The same is true of your Web site. When people visit, the first thing they notice is what it looks like. If it doesn't look professional, well organized and attractive, it doesn't reflect well on your company or your product. It reduces their confidence in you. And it reduces the chance they will buy from you. After all, would you hire a fellow who looked like he lived on the street to run your sales department?

Don't just go with your own judgment on this. Ask a lot of people for their opinion, including customers. Listen to what they say. In e-commerce, disorganization is an unforgivable sin.

### **Do all pages seem attractive, and present a harmonious look that reflect the company's desired image and personality?**

You want to convey an image that seems attractive to your visitor. That varies. The owner of a Harley store in LA once said he didn't even consider employees unless they had at least two tattoos showing.

Whatever the look you need to create that image, it must look professional. Visitors are coming to you for specialized information, services and products. They don't want to do business with amateurs or second-raters. They've got too many other options waiting on the search engine.

Since they can't see you behind the counter, all they've got to go on is what your Web site looks like, and what it says. Your first job is to be sure their initial impression is "*This looks like a company that has it all together.*"

### **Do the pages look like they would be easy to read and understand?**

Look through a newspaper or magazine, noticing which ads seem to invite your eyes to read them. Most of them have a simple, open look that suggest its ideas will be simple to read and understand.

People approach Web sites the same way. They want to find a site which will be simple to tackle, promising that it won't take them much time to find what they want. Use columns, colors, simple graphics, and white space to create an open look that seems inviting. Give them what they want, and how they want it delivered, and they'll keep coming back.

### **Does the homepage and site seem to reflect the age and type of audience it seeks?**

Your site must do more than promise to satisfy the buying motives of your visitors. It must also present that message in a way that their image of your company.

K-Mart can promise 'cool' clothing all day long, but its image as a cheap discounter works against that promise. The same can be true of your site.

Your site's colors, graphics, language, fonts, sounds, and a dozen other factors all influence your visitors' impression. The closer that impression is to the one they want and expect to see, the better your image -- and the better chance they will buy.

How do you decide what to use? Age, education, sex, socioeconomic level, where they live, even race make a difference. The key buying motives -- needs, wants, fears and desires -- are very important. For example, no matter what their age or sex, if they're looking for serious information (*"my mom's got cancer and I need to find out what to expect"*), they want a serious-looking site. That's why the more you know about your targeted groups of visitors, the more likely you will design a Web site they respond to. Remember, one size has never fit all, no matter what the ad says!

### **Does the look and "feel" of the site seem ethical and honest?**

People don't know you from Adam. But they do know a lot of shysters, and they've been disappointed by vendors before. That makes them leery of you and your products. How do you convince them to trust you? One (of many) way is to make your site look trustworthy.

What does that mean? It means looking professional, not like a site put together by high school kids. It means not using overblown rhetoric (*"Be a millionaire in less than six months!"*, *"the greatest product since the automobile!"*, *"Lose thirty pounds in thirty days!"*) It means having policies which not only are ethical, but sound ethical as well. If you offer a money-back guarantee, don't hedge or fill it so full of caveats that it sounds dishonest. Your promises must not only be honest, they must sound honest, too.

### **Does the site overwhelm visitors (and increase download time) with big graphics, animation, etc?**

Research suggests that the average visitor will give your home page about eight to ten seconds to download. They are even less forgiving about the rest of your pages. You know that big graphics and animation slows your download time. But you may think you need them to look "cool." You don't. Most visitors want information, not entertainment. They'd rather have the quick, simple layout of a library to the noisy confusion of a nightclub.

Colors can also overwhelm them. (And remember that some colors don't look the same on all browsers, especially yellows.) If you don't understand color coordination (and few men do!), you may create a color hodgepodge that can distract their eyes, or give you a "cheap" image.

In short, keep your colors few, basic and presented in simple schemes. White is still your best bet. And remember, if you opt for a dark colored background and reversed (white or light) letters, anyone who prints your page will really be unhappy about all the ink it takes.

### **Does the site overwhelm visitors with advertising banners and ads?**

Even a simple site can be ugly if it is cluttered with banners and box ads, especially if they are animated or feature rollovers. While ads are a necessary part of many sites (you might even be advertising your own product!), don't overdo it. Box ads should be unobtrusive (the more they look like information and the less they look like ads, the better their readership), and you should limit yourself to one banner ad in view at a time.

Remember that your visitors see your Web site pages as a single unit. If you are allowing an advertiser put unattractive, annoying banner ads on your site, you will bear the brunt of their displeasure. Not a good way to create a positive image, or get a return visit.

### **Does the color scheme reflect the image of the company and the expectations of visitors?**

If you have a funeral home web site, would you use a hot pink and orange color scheme? Of course not. But businesses make similar mistakes all the time. Usually it is because the owner wants to use the colors of the company's logo, or imposes his/her personal tastes on the designer. Neither are good reasons to select a color scheme.

When selecting your color scheme, ask yourself . . .

- \* What colors will enhance the image you want for your company and product?
- \* What colors will reflect the expectations of your visitors?
- \* What colors will help you display your products in the most favorable, attractive way?
- \* What colors will not distract the eye from your most important content -- your message?

### **Do you give your site a full make-over at least twice a year to keep it fresh and interesting for repeat visitors?**

People get bored easily. Something that looks exciting and interesting at first, fades after the tenth or fifteenth visit. If your plan is to have visitors regularly visit your site, consider doing a 'make over' one or twice a year.

This does NOT mean changing the location of pages or the way people get around or the type of information you provide. People like continuity. They like to know exactly where in the supermarket they can find the soup, and that the TV listings are on the back page of the LifeStyle section of the newspaper.

Don't confuse them. But do consider changing your color scheme, changing some graphics and even the font you use. They may not be able to pinpoint what you've done, but they will know that it look different, while remaining the same. It's like giving a room a new coat of paint, but leaving the furniture in the same place. It gives the room a new look, but you won't stub your toe in the dark.

## **Section Seven: Design and Layout**

### **Are the basic areas of information offered on top of the fold?**

'Top of the fold' is the area above the fold of a newspaper. On a Web site it is the area at the top of the page -- the first area a visitor sees. When visitors arrive at your site, they know what they're looking for. Be sure that they don't have to scroll down in order to discover if you have it. At the top of every Amazon page, visitors can jump directly to the area selling books, or CDs or videos. They don't have to look around.

Your visitors shouldn't, either. Give them the navigation tools they want, show them the type of content they want (if you're selling shoes, show them the 'hot' styles on the homepage), and give them a sample of the most popular types of information you offer ("*Harvard scientists find garlic helps prevent cancer . . .*") When you are considerate of their needs and desires, they will enjoy their visit, and make plans to come back.

### **Does your homepage route visitors to different sub-sites based on their interests, motives, and characteristics?**

If you owned a bookstore, would you put books on astronomy, cooking and sex all in the same area, arranged alphabetically? Of course not. You recognize that people have different interests, different motives, and different reasons for coming in your bookstore.

Visitors to a Web site are no different. They would prefer not to look through the astronomy books on your Web site to find books on cooking. So why not give them a choice about where they would like to go and how they would like to be treated?

That includes how they want to shop. If they want to browse through your shoes, they should not have to go through the same process as those who know exactly the style and color they want to find. The former should be able to see a lot of thumbnail pictures at once, while the latter should have a search option coupled with a quick check out.

### **Do you use headlines and subheads to break up the page and convey key ideas?**

Because Web visitors tend to skim at first, then read later, after you've proven that you have what they want, it is useful to employ the layout trick used by direct mail writers -- use plenty of headlines and subheads in bold face or all caps to break up the page into manageable 'bite size' pieces. For the same reason, it is often wise to make your first paragraph short, even just a sentence or two.

You should make your headlines reflect the benefits of the information presented in that section ("*How New Super Widgets Save You Time and Money*"). The subheads should do the same for individual ideas ("*One Step Saves You Time*"), including testimonials ("*A Boise Secretary's Experience with Super Widgets*").

### **Do you use headlines and subheads to gently reinforce your sales message without sounding like it?**

Remember, you are trying to present information (the reason they have shown up), but within that context, you want to add more and more layers of positive ideas about your product.

Here's the subtle, but important, difference: If you read "*Buy Super Widgets. They Save You Time,*" you know you've read a sales pitch, which you are very used to ignoring, or disbelieving. But if you say the same thing with a different slant, "*Study Shows Women Prefer Super Widgets: Saves Them Time,*" then it sounds like 'news' (what they came for), not sales (which they decidedly did not come for.)

Always look for ways to make your headlines and subheads do double duty -- provide information and remind them of why your product would answer their real buying motives.

### **Do you use bullet points to emphasize important ideas?**

Bullet points make it easy to skim a section of text. If you have several items or ideas to list, rather than presenting them in a long sentence separated by commas, put them in bullet-point form. You'll find that these bullets are some of your most read text. Why?

- \* Column of bullets attract the eye
- \* Single lines look easier to process and understand
- \* Single lines invite eye to read them
- \* Key words and phrases stand out better in single line listings.

Of course, your bullet point lines can exceed one line. Bullets even help to break up the staid look of longer paragraphs. But bullets really pay off when they highlight very short phrases and single words. They dramatically increase the readership of that material. Don't ignore bullets as a way to help sell your message.

### **Do you keep your banner ads to a minimum?**

Keep the number of banners and other ads your visitors see to a minimum. Don't overwhelm them with too many ads on the screen at the same time, or banners with a tasteless approach. Banners can create a garish, second-class image of your site. Remember, if an ad offends, you get the blame because it's your site.

Research tends to show that people don't like banner ads, and most often ignore them. Click-throughs on banner ads average (depending on whose research you believe), anywhere from 0.75% to 0.25 % -- in other words, for every one person who goes to your site through its banner ad, you had another 134 who ignored it or weren't sufficiently aroused to find out more. And that's the "good" end of the spectrum. On the "bad" end, you only get one visitor for every 400 people who are exposed to your banner!

Those odds -- and they've been going up for a while, should suggest to you that relying on banner advertising is not going to get you that mansion in the Hamptons. Of course, how well your banner does has a lot to do with what you're selling, where you advertise, and how well your message hits readers' real buying motivations.

### **Does the site require horizontal scrolling?**

No one likes to see only part of the screen, the rest spilling off to the right, out of sight until they scroll over. That's a silly mistake to make, one that needlessly annoys your visitors. By simply setting your page or table size to 100% instead of specifying the width in pixels, you can solve the problem for most visitors you have.

**Does the site remain as the host during any jumps (so you always must come back home)?**

People like sites that offer links to other, related sites. But one problem is that once they click on another site, they're usually gone from yours. And it is so easy to wander down a path, going from interesting site to site, and never going back to yours.

The solution is to use code which brings up the new site in a box within your site. This requires the use of frames, which many designers don't like, but it's worth serious consideration. That way, when they leave the linked site, they're back at your site.

**Do you ask the visitor several times to bookmark the site?**

Nearly 70% of people reach sites a second time through bookmarks. But if they forgot to bookmark your site, will they be able to find it again? Why take that chance?

Don't rely on their memory. Ask them to bookmark the site. Ask them repeatedly. Put a reminder on most every page. After all, they may not decide until they're several pages deep into your site that it is worth a bookmark. You could even use a pop-up screen when they try to exit. If they like your site, they will want to bookmark it.

Give them a reason to say 'yes.' Ask them a question: *"Is this information useful to you? Then remember to bookmark us."* Or make a promise: *"New articles and features every week! Don't forget to bookmark us."*

Be sure the title of your Web site will remind them about the information they found. You don't want a bookmarked Web site name that makes them scratch their head and wonder what you have to offer.

## **Section Eight: Your Site's 'Personality'**

### **Does the site treat visitors like individuals, rather than a mass audience?**

Many companies think of their visitors like a TV audience, a mass of millions of people who might look at their Web site. Television viewers think of themselves the same way, one of millions watching a program.

But that is not how they see themselves on the Web. Online they see themselves as individuals, like a single shopper who has dropped into your boutique and finds she is the only customer in the store. Visitors want to be treated with all the patience, consideration, and personalized attention that you would devote to the only customer in your boutique. They don't want to be treated like a number. (*"Number 14. Now serving Number 14. Next?"*)

How would you help them in that situation? Personalized service? You bet. The more you can make them feel special, the more they will like you, and want to buy from you. If you treat them like a number, they'll treat you the same way.

Remember: When products and services are bought like commodities, the way to get an advantage is through good customer service.

### **Does your site greet visitors in a friendly way and tell them that you are glad they dropped by?**

Some stores treat you like a number, and others like a person. Wal-Mart prides itself on greeting customers as they arrive. In fact, one delay in their Web site was the concern that the shopper's online experience would not be as customer-friendly as their store experience.

Your Web visitors like to be greeted in a friendly way. A simple "Welcome" is enough. Just a word or two that says, "We recognize that you are a human being with feelings, not a robot, and we intend to treat you that way, starting with this friendly greeting."

### **Does your site leave a cookie (if allowed) so it can greet return visitors by name?**

Aren't you pleased when you enter a store you frequent and the clerk greets you by name? It makes you feel special. And that translates into an increased liking and respect for the store. Nordstrom has built its reputation on outstanding customer service just like that.

Once a visitor has given you their name, you can greet and advise them personally. A simple program reads a cookie that your site has deposited in their hard drive (if allowed), which includes their name. When your homepage pops up, the first words the visitor reads could be, *"Hello, Mary, welcome back. Glad you could drop in again!"* When Mary has selected a set of dishes, your site can ask, *"Mary, would you like to look at matching place settings?"*

Of course, thanks to the wonders of computers, this great personalized greeting is entirely handled by machines. But it doesn't matter. It still makes the visitor feel special, and it adds to your positive image.

Remember, no matter how simple a bit of extra customer service might be, 80% of your competitors will never do it, and half the those that do won't do it right. Don't overlook this edge.

### **Does the site offer interactive options to give visitors a sense of control on the site?**

“Interactivity” is a buzzword in Web site design. And it will just get louder. The trend is away from ‘brochureware’ sites that just present the same information found in the company’s brochure to ‘interactive’ sites that let visitors tailor the experience to fit their needs.

Home Depot has a tremendous interactive site. Visitors can get advice on the special projects they are doing, enter some basic information and receive detailed data about how much concrete or paint they will need, watch videos about how to pour a sidewalk or plant a tree, and even arrange for their order to be delivered. Visitors have the feeling they’ve received the same sort of personalized help they would get at the store.

Other sites also offer interactive features, including the chance to chat live with a customer service employee. Whatever alternative you choose, try to have a site which is more interactive and personalized than your company brochure.

### **Is anything about your site or its content offensive to your targeted visitors?**

One sad and troubling aspect of the development of the Internet is its growing lack of manners. More than a few Web sites think nothing of using offensive words, sexual jokes and bathroom humor. It’s like the twelve year old boy inside some Web designers has suddenly been given a can of spray paint and a white wall. Since no one can see them, they feel free to offend without compunction.

Some of these folks write banner ads, and offer them in exchange programs. While the exchange program staff are suppose to weed out the offensive ones, with millions of banners out there, some get through. You don’t want these ads on your site. Be sure to check your exchange banner ads regularly, and take down ones that would offend your visitors. Then complain to your banner exchange service. Remember, your visitors will blame you if they are offended, not the company owning the banner.

As you write your persuasive Web messages, it is easy to get carried away with your own creative humor, and fail to recognize it might be sexually, racially, religiously offensive, or just in plain bad taste. Why take a chance on needlessly offending a potential customer?

Get a few other people, including customers, to read your Web site ads and content, especially if you think you may be drifting into an offensive area. Remember, you are here to sell, not win a literary prize or show your friends how ‘cool’ you can be.

### **Does your site seem to have a ‘personality,’ or is it just a bland, indistinguishable, forgettable place?**

Name all the unforgettable restaurants you’ve ever been in; then compare that number to the total number of restaurants you’ve eaten in. Even without exact numbers, you realize the unforgettable restaurants are a minuscule percentage of the total.

Why do you remember a place? Because it has ‘personality,’ that special flair or style which makes it stand out in your mind.

Web sites can be like that. Web sites, like companies and products, can have a personality. The difference between a ‘personality’ and an ‘image’ is that a personality has human-like qualities -- friendly, rude, charming, insufferable, professional, and so on. You want your site to have a personality which makes people like it, and like your company by extension.

How do you give a Web site ‘personality?’

First, decide what personality is right for your site, and for the way you want to position your product against its competition. Do you need to have a 'one of the gang' friendly personality to offset the stilted personality of your competition (think Compaq vs IBM)? Do you need to present a highly professional personality to offset your company's newness? Or do you need a 'I'm so cool' personality to attract others, especially teens, who only buy from the coolest places?

Second, look at the magazines your target audience reads. Study the ads, looking for the ways in which each company portrays its products to the reader. You're looking for the elements that convey the same feeling as the personality you seek. For example, if you want 'cool,' look at teen magazines. See how they show teens in their ads who are wearing or using their products. You can bet that they are trying to show readers that *"if you wear my jeans, everyone will think you are soooo cool."*

Magazine advertisers have spent a great deal of money over the years testing their ad concepts. Take advantage of it by studying how they are selling to their target market. You are both trying to influence the same buyers' minds.

Also look at the stories, and especially at the regular columns. What do they talk about, how do they say it, what phrases and ideas do they use? After you've looked through several magazines targeted to your type of visitors, you'll detect the same persuasive concepts being used in different ways. For example, ads for Michelin tires, Volvo, and Lysol, among many others, use elements like babies and children to help create a "caring" personality for their company -- by showing the kids in situations which could be potentially dangerous without their product, and emphasizing how much the company cares about their safety.

You'll see that different ads try to create different personalities for their companies, although most of them will just create a personality you don't want -- the incredible bore.

Third, use what you learn on your own site. Once you've picked out the elements the Big Boys have used to create the personality you also want to project, you can use those same elements -- color, language, style, layout, pictures, etc. to help create your own site's personality.

Your site's personality, just like yours, is conveyed by a collection of attributes you present to others -- the way you speak, what you say, how you say it, your smile and grooming and humor, etc. By giving your site a personality as well as an image, you can increase its memorability and the chances your visitors will like it.

## **Section Nine: Customer Service**

### **Does the site frustrate visitors with download delays, lack of clarity, navigation problems, poor information, inadequate information, poor directions, etc?**

Frustration is one of the biggest reasons visitors abandon a site -- frustration over slow download, frustration over navigation tools that don't make sense, and frustration with a check out process that confuses them, among many other possibilities.

Frustration is generally the lack of clear thinking and failure to apply the Golden Rule -- think carefully about how you want to be treated as a shopper, then make your site do the same for them.

The best way to do this, to iron out the bugs, is to test it with people who are unfamiliar with your site or your products. There are 'usability' testing labs which do an incredible job. But if you don't have the capital to support professional testing right now, at least ask some friends and acquaintances to surf your site. You will learn more if you stand behind them, watching what they do, where they go (or try to), how they buy, etc. Don't answer questions, just be a silent observer. And write down all the problems you see them having so you can fix them. Chances are that if they have a problem, others will have that same problem, too.

### **Does the site offer a "Help" or Frequently Asked Questions page?**

Remember the analogy to the boutique experience? Visitors want to get the information they need and get on with their life. But sometimes they need more information or explanation. If they were in a boutique, they would just call you over and ask their questions. On the Web, the Help or Frequently Asked Questions page takes your place.

Write down as many questions as you can think of that visitors might have. Then ask your friends and family to do the same after they've explored the site.

Now provide answers to these questions. Group them in some logical categories. And you've got your FAQ page. If you want to really be visitor-friendly, provide them with keyword search option. And list all of the questions at the top of the FAQ page with links to the place where the question and answer appear on the page. Be sure to provide an e-mail option that will allow them to contact you directly if your FAQ page hasn't answered their question.

Finally, don't call it "FAQ," but "Frequently Asked Questions." Not everyone knows that abbreviation. They shouldn't need an FAQ page to find out what FAQ means!

### **Does the site allow the visitor to send e-mail to the company? (Not just to the webmaster)?**

It is amazing how many company sites don't provide a phone number, much less an 800-number, for people to call. It's even more amazing how many companies don't even provide an e-mail option. Unless they simply forgot it, one would expect their thinking was 'we don't have time to answer a bunch of customer questions.' If that's you, please reconsider.

Visitors want to be treated with respect, and that includes answering their questions. Would you tell your shop clerks to help customers check out, but not answer any questions? Of course not. It's the same online. People usually have a few questions before they buy. Fail to

answer the questions, and you fail to get the sale. The only difference online is that you can't watch them walk out of your store empty-handed.

### **Does the company have a policy of quickly replying to e-mails?**

You must not only give people the option of sending you an e-mail, but also respond to it quickly. In a survey done last year, over 40% of e-mails sent to corporations NEVER received a reply, and only 15% received a prompt reply.

Every e-mail question should receive some personal reply within 24-hours, even if it is just a note saying, *'Got your e-mail and we're working on the answer.'* Many companies have such a note on an autoresponder so it comes to the sender the second their e-mail is received. Good idea. They not only know you will respond, but that you got their message.

### **Does the site anticipate problems and questions the visitor may have, and offer solutions?**

The mark of a well-designed Web site is its ability to anticipate what visitors will want, and provide the solutions. This comes in the form of navigation, content of the homepage, checkout process, security questions, and a dozen other areas. That's what good customer service is all about. Nordstrom knows, for example, that people dislike the long process of returning an item. They anticipate that every customer with a return will share that sentiment. So they have designed their return process to be quick, polite, and efficient. That anticipation has created enormous good will for the brand.

You can do the same thing. Ask friends and customers to tell you all of the areas where they might have questions or run into problems. Then ask them what solution would be the very best and easiest for them. Shoot for that solution. Remember -- in the future, more online battles among competitors will be won by superior customer service than by price.

### **Does the site offer a strong guarantee of satisfaction or "your money back?"**

People don't know who you are, and they don't know how good your product is (in fact, they don't even know if it exists at all!) To trust you with their money, their name, address and credit card, they need to be reassured. They want to know they have an 'out.'

One of the best ways to reassure them is to offer a 'money-back guarantee.' Even better, call it an "unconditional, no-questions-asked, money-back guarantee." When people decide to return an item, they prefer not to have to explain why, and they certainly don't want to feel they can't get a refund without a good explanation!

Most companies that offer such guarantees put a time limit on it, such as two days or two weeks. That is certainly acceptable. But if you really want to impress visitors with your confidence in the product, offer a guarantee that lasts six months or a year! Nearly everyone who will return a product will do so within two weeks, so your downside risk is minimal. But the upside in terms of enhancing your image of trustworthiness is terrific.

## ***Section Ten: Shopping***

### **Does the site allow visitors to quickly get to the type of product they want through several routes?**

Not all shoppers behave the same way. Some like to browse and compare prices or features. Others like to look at many of the items you have to offer. And still others just like to pop in, get exactly what they're after, and leave. Your purchasing routines should be set up for each of these types.

How? Look at a large online retailer like Gap. Visitors can quickly see (and buy) the 'hottest' products on the homepage, browse through their entire selection of tops or pants, take a leisurely stroll through all of the types of items for sale, from sweaters to socks to KidsGap clothing, or simply type in what they want and be taken right to it.

Again, usability testing is of great value here. If you don't use a professional firm, ask people to try out your site. Let some just wander around as they wish. For others, give them a motivation you want to test -- be a browser, be in a hurry to buy a khaki top in a small, etc. Watch how simple it is for them to do what they want, and how much they enjoy it (or not!) Then make changes accordingly.

### **Does the site offer numerous options and mix-and-match solutions to meet shoppers' needs?**

Shoppers don't want what you have to sell, they want what they want to buy. If you offer a jeans set with jeans and a vest, they may not want both (or the right size for the vest may not be the right size for the jeans in that set). What they want is the option to buy each piece separately.

Be careful that you are not inadvertently constraining your buyers' choices or options. If you want to create package deals, offer the items separately, but at a discount if purchased together. Then, instead of making customers feel you are limiting their options, they'll feel like they're getting a bargain.

Remember, how you make your customers feel in your store goes a long way toward making the sale. We seldom buy from people who irritate us, and almost never do so twice.

### **Does the site offer bargains and discounts for multiple purchases?**

People like bargains. Actually, they like the feeling that they are getting a bargain. Millions of people have happily purchased paintings, sofas and dresses from stores that were "Going Out of Business: 80% Off!" They didn't know the store had doubled its ticket price before holding the sale (which can go on for years!). All they knew was they bought a \$500 seashore painting for just \$100, a fact they will cheerfully point out to friends for years to come.

We are not suggesting you engage in this deceptive trade practice! Only that you understand how getting a great deal makes shoppers feel. To create that feeling, offer bargains and discounts, such as for multiple purchases. Your goal is not only to make this sale, but to make the shopper feel so good about it that s/he will gladly come back. One of the best ways to do that is to make her feel she got a real bargain and saved money. This is true of

both B-to-C and B-to-B e-commerce -- everyone likes to get a bargain, and brag about it to others!

### **Do you offer added value to make customers want to return?**

You make the most off of return customers because it doesn't cost you as much to resell them as to acquire them in the first place. So if you are only getting that first sale, and not the others, you are not maximizing your marketing strategy.

How do you get people to return? There are numerous ideas presented in this book and others, but one of the best is to make them feel good about their initial purchase. How? Besides being treated in a personal, friendly way and quickly finding what they want to buy, people like to feel they got more than they paid for. It's like the butcher throwing in a few dog bones with your steak, or the baker including an extra bagel, or the florist putting in an extra flower. These are "tricks" that retailers have practiced for centuries. They still do it because it works. And it will work online, too.

If they make a purchase, offer them a gift for buying (like the tote bags that cosmetics companies give when shoppers buy so many dollars worth of lipstick and moisturizers). The gift is a value-added component in the equation, making the overall deal more attractive (*"Wow, I got the L'Oreal lipstick, foundation, and this cool tote bag with the L'Oreal name on it (!), and they even gave me two loaves of french bread [a real promotion], and I only paid \$45 for all that!"*)

Many women will go back to that cosmetics counter because the experience left them feeling good about their ability to get a good deal. Next week, when the same manufacturer runs an ad for a special price on eye shadow, chances are they will be more inclined to go back (to re-experience the same pleasurable emotions), rather than purchase eye shadow somewhere else that is not associated with a pleasurable experience.

Give your customers regular reasons to come back and experience their own pleasurable emotions again. Tell them on your site that you offer weekly specials on products they use, and offer gifts with purchases. Then get their e-mail address so you can remind them. Remember, you're selling more than just products, you're selling them emotions, too.

### **Are the prices easy to find?**

Some companies don't make it quick and easy to find how much an item costs. Instead of displaying it alongside the item, they make shoppers go to another screen to find out the price. That's a mistake. It frustrates people, and doesn't make them any more likely to buy. It is a rude way to treat customers.

Put your price by your product, but put it underneath the description of its benefits and features. Your preference is for them to read the description before looking at the price. That's why infomercials for kitchen gadgets and weight loss products extoll all their virtues before revealing the "Amazingly Low Price."

If you offer volume discounts, tell them right there "discounts available." And if you offer time payment plans, tell them that, too. Once they've decided they can't afford a product they want, it's harder to get the sale. It's far better to offer some options while they're ready to take the next step.

### **Can visitors from other countries convert it to their currency?**

Americans will comprise less than 50% of the world market in a couple of years. Europe, Asia and Latin America are coming online in droves -- a trend that will explode once the problems of the cost of getting online and the antiquated per-minute line charges are resolved. This means you will really have a global market on the other side of your computer screen. And global competitors, too. Many companies, even if they primarily serve a local clientele (like a restaurant), may find some additional revenue stream by selling other products or services online. In many parts of the world, the "American" label is very attractive, creating a value-added component to the sale. ("Yes, Antonio, my new marketing consultant is in New York City!") Just as many Americans may choose a French wine over an American wine simply because of its image, so customers in other countries may choose an American product over their own for the same reason.

Research shows that customers in other countries are more likely to buy from you if they know what the cost is in their own money, without doing the math. You can easily install code that will do this conversion for them. It is just another example of personalized service that people appreciate, no matter where they live.

### **Do you take credit cards?**

Most people want to pay with a credit card. Even with their concern about security, they are more comfortable doing that than giving you a check. They know that, unlike their bank, the credit card company will help them resolve any dispute.

To take credit cards, you need a 'merchant account.' This is a computer software file created by a third party, like a bank, that handles all the financial processing of the transaction. The merchant account provider usually offers 128-bit encryption to maximize security, which is important for the peace of mind of your customers.

There are many different kinds of alternatives in taking credit cards. Some cost several hundred dollars for the software, plus a sizable charge each month to cover processing, reports, etc. In addition, most companies charge a fee based on a percentage of the total sales (1.5% - 2.5% is a common range.)

Other companies charge no up-front fees, but take a larger percentage. BeSeen, for example, provides you with a "Buy" button to put on your site. Click it and the buyer is taken to the I-Escrow web site, a major online merchant account provider, where the transaction is completed. BeSeen charges you about 6% of the sale, deducts their fee from the payment, and sends you a check.

There are several other alternatives. It's worth going to [www.internet.com](http://www.internet.com) and going to their "Electronic Commerce Guide," which lists over two dozen options. Whichever one you choose, you will definitely need to take credit cards to survive in the e-commerce game.

### **Do you offer a shopping cart?**

If you have more than one product or service for sale, you need a shopping cart. Without one, your visitors will have to purchase each product they want individually. Imagine buying each purchase you make at the hardware store or boutique separately! If you don't have a shopping cart, you'll lose customers. Where do you get one? Talk to the company which handles your merchant account. Chances are they have one. If not, there are numerous sites

that offer free shopping carts. But be sure they will interface properly with your credit card processing software.

### **Do you offer a shopping bot ?**

A popular new innovation is the 'shopping bot,' an electronic helper that will ask you what you want to buy, the specifications, and how much you want to pay. Then it whizzes off into cyberspace, visiting thousands of stores, looking for matches. It brings them all back to you for your consideration. After you choose, it helps you through the buying process, too. Yes, it is just like having an Administrative Assistant of your very own.

You can offer a bot on your site -- offering that personalized touch, much like favored high fashion customers at Saks receive as they sip tea and look at new styles brought out for their consideration. You make your visitors feel special, and save them time. A great combination for creating a loyal customer.

## ***Section Eleven: Selling and Upselling***

### **Do you explicitly state the benefits of your product or service?**

What are people buying? Not your product or service. They don't want that. And they sure don't want to pay you any money for it. What they're buying is Satisfaction. They want to know that the results of using your product or service will give them that satisfaction.

That means you don't focus on the features of your product, you focus on the benefits it will create for them.

Here's a good example. When a man goes into a hardware store to buy a quarter-inch drill, does he want the drill? Sure. But that's not all he wants. He also wants a quarter inch hole. But that's not all either, unless he just likes drilling holes. What he really wants is a pretty birdhouse or spice rack that the hole will help him create. That's three separate levels of buying motivations. And there is a fourth -- the most important. What he's really buying when he purchases that drill is the emotional reward of giving the spice rack to his wife and hearing her say, "Oh, honey, it's beautiful!" Or seeing a family of birds nesting in the birdhouse and feeling the pride of knowing that he created it.

There are four separate levels of buying motivations, some are fact-based and others are emotion-based. If you are only selling the "drill," or even the "drill" and the "hole," you're missing out on sales you could have by emphasizing the emotional benefits your product or service will deliver. Some common emotional benefits are pride, safety, hope, love, reduction of guilt (big in the insurance game), ego enhancement, and lust, among many others.

Focus on the emotions they want to feel, and the results they want to get. State them clearly, don't leave the visitor to guess. Benefits and emotions, as well as features and facts, sell products. Remember, guys don't want a Corvette, they want to go fast and look cool. So promise to sell them what they really want to buy!

### **Do you present specific facts and data to back up any claims?**

Psychologists tell us that people today are far less trusting than their parents or grandparents were. Few people have avoided being cheated or robbed sometime during their lives, often more than once. They have good reason to be distrustful just from reading the newspaper.

This means their natural tendency is to not trust you, your products or your promises. What you need to give them is not more promises, but something that will give them more confidence. Facts and data are two good examples. If you promise that your car is fast, they want to know some facts to back it up. Like "Independent test track results show the new Rocket goes from 0 to 60 in 5.6 seconds."

Yes, they still must trust that your report is true, but just having "independent test results" and hard numbers create a new level of confidence -- they now have hard data that support your promises. Don't overlook the value of supportive facts and test data as a way to tip the consumer into a buying decision.

### **Do you ask the visitor to place an order or make a call?**

The most fundamental rule in selling is 'ask for the sale.' Your Web site should do the same. It might be direct, like "*Click here to add this item to your shopping cart.*" Or it might be more indirect, like "*Would you like to select a top to go with your jeans?*" You might be asking for the order, or just asking them to take the next step -- "*Get more information on this offer. Click here now.*"

Researchers have found that using commands like "click here" and telling them to do it "now" increase the response rate. Banner ads that contain the words "click here" get a better response, too.

Remember, your site isn't a library. You want them to buy, not just browse. So ask them.

### **Is it easy to order online?**

Research shows nearly a third of all transactions are abandoned AFTER the buyer said 'yes!' For many of them, the process was too complicated, or they were asked for too much personal information. Older shoppers are one of the fastest growing segments of Internet users -- and many of them have bought something online. But they are especially concerned about giving out personal information like credit card numbers.

What's the difference between an easy and hard check-out? In the consumer's mind, it boils down to two things: The number of different places and steps they must go through, and the number of blanks they must fill in.

Review your buying process from a novice shopper's point of view. Is it short? Is it as easy as 1-2-3? Do you (or your merchant account provider) ask for the minimum information needed? Do you clearly explain your security ("128-bit encryption" doesn't mean a lot to many people!)? Do you clearly state your privacy policy ("*nothing to nobody no time*")? Have you thought about all the ways they could misinterpret the information requested? Do you have a buyers' FAQ page? Can they call you with an 800-number if they have questions? Have you designed your purchasing process as though you were creating it for your own family's convenience?

If you are using a third-party merchant account provider like e-Escrow, you don't have a lot of choice in what they ask for, but you can make your end of the process simple. To make it easy, try to do everything on one page. Don't make them go to several pages to fill out shipping information or see the total cost of their order. Ask for the minimum amount of information possible. Sure you want to know their income and how old they are, but that isn't critical for making the purchase, and they know it.

Don't throw money away. Make it as simple to check out of your Web site as it is in a Dairy Queen.

### **Is it easy to go back, make changes, add products, etc.?**

Some Web designers only think in one direction -- forward. They forget that people change their minds. Your site should make it easy for someone to change their order, to pick a different size or color, or to add more items. And it should be very obvious how to do it, like having a button which reads "*To change your order, click here.*"

Never forget that you're dealing with people who make mistakes, change their minds, and fool themselves into thinking, for a while, that they really can get into a size 5. Don't lose the sale by not accommodating them when they want a change.

### **Does the site try to upsell the buyer other products before completing check out?**

Retailers will tell you the people most likely to buy from you are those who have bought from you before. After a visitor has decided to purchase one of your online products or services, be sure to offer them a few other, RELATED items to buy. If they've bought shoes, offer them socks. If they've bought a Clint Black CD, offer them one that features Clint Black and Faith Hill duets. If they've bought a health insurance policy, offer them a term life policy.

As a general rule, the upsell product(s) should not cost more than the item they've purchased. You want to tap into their thinking -- *"Well, I've just spent \$60 on shoes, so what's another \$10 for some socks?"*

Think of it like the checkout area at the grocery store. What do they offer? A lot of different inexpensive items that people regularly buy. Impulse items like gum and candy and magazines. Ask yourself what else you sell, or could sell, would appeal to your buyers. You'll upsell more if you show a picture of the item, and even more if you offer a combo deal -- one pair of socks for \$5.00 or two for \$8.00.

If you're not upselling, you're losing money that could have been yours.

### **Does the site offer an alternative way to make a purchase?**

Some people just don't want to give out a credit card number, and others don't have credit cards. You should not close out the possibility of selling to them by restricting your payment option to credit cards.

Consider offering the option of paying by electronic check, too. Buyers simply type in the information about their bank and account number, and in a few seconds the sale is approved. The money is deposited in your account. Many merchant account providers offer electronic check payment option, too. Consider adding one to your site.

## ***Section Twelve: Security***

### **Does the site give the buyer a sense of security about making an online purchase by explaining its security precautions?**

Most people don't really want to settle for your "trust us" reassurance that their credit card number is safe. There have been too many stories about hackers. They don't really know anything about online security, but they do know they want to be reassured. So that is exactly what you need to do.

How? You can give them a copy of your merchant account provider's security explanation, copied from that Web site. You can offer a testimonial or a rating of the service. Whatever you do, do something. Don't simply hope that buyers will trust you to take care of their credit card number without any explanation (which is, of course, exactly what most of us do when we hand our card to a waiter!)

### **Do you have 128-bit encryption security for sales transactions?**

Most people have no idea what that means, but they've heard it, and they know that is the code word for the most secure type of transaction. Chances are your merchant account provider offers it. If so, tell your customers that you have "*128-bit encryption security, the most secure way to use your credit card online.*" Help them feel as safe as possible when they make a purchase.

## **Section Thirteen: Building Relationships**

### **Does the site encourage relationship-building and brand loyalty through programs like new customer discounts, date reminders, e-mail newsletters, etc.?**

More and more we're seeing that the same type of marketing programs that work in the bricks-and-mortar world also work online. One of those programs is building relationships.

Online relationships are a 'no-brainer' for Web businesses. Why? Because it is so simple to set up a relationship which appears very personal to your customers. You hold all the information you've collected about them -- e-mail, age, sex, what they bought, etc -- in computer files. You can then reach out to them with targeted messages -- specials, newsletters, interesting information, etc. -- which your computer handles by scanning your database for keywords (like women over 40 who bought in the Juniors department). Best of all, you can address them by name in the message.

People like to feel special. Building relationship programs helps make them feel that way. And that, in turn, leads to loyalty, repeat buying, and word-of-mouth advertising.

### **Do you offer a chat room or a bulletin board where customers can interact?**

This is one of the true marketing innovations of the Web. In bricks-and-mortar stores, strangers would never think about getting together to discuss how they felt about various store products. But on the Web it is becoming more and more common.

The value of a chat room or bulletin board to you is in creating an interactive relationship with your customers. By allowing them to correspond with other customers, or potential customers, you are making your site more personal for them, and providing an extra service which they like. It is also a great way for you to add your own thoughts to any discussion.

It is easy to set up a chat room or bulletin board, but it does require careful maintenance and monitoring. You can find the code to set up a chat room at [www.resourceindex.com](http://www.resourceindex.com). Before you take the step, visit some sites that offer these options. See if you really like it, and learn from the sites that do it well. Like anything else, it can be done well, or be a complete shambles.

### **Do you ask for their e-mail address?**

If you have an e-commerce site, research shows that the average visitor will come back six times before buying something from you for the first time! You shouldn't rely on the chance that they'll remember to find you again. Get their e-mail address so you can remind them.

You may be tempted to ask for more information. Consider this: the more you ask for and the more time it takes them to enter it, the fewer people who will do it. People don't want to give you personal information. Even giving their name is too much for some people.

You want to build a positive, personal relationship with them. To do that, you don't really need anything now but their e-mail address. Don't lose a possible customer by getting greedy.

### **Do you offer them something in exchange for their e-mail address?**

Many people don't like to give out information to strangers. And they don't want to take the time to do it. But you need their e-mail address. It is your marketing gold mine. So, how to get it? Simple. Bribe them. Offer them something they would like in exchange for it, just like you'd offer a kid desert for eating his spinach.

Make it big enough that it seems worth their while. It's a good idea to test several different offers to see which gets the best response. Then go with that one. But keep testing out new ideas, too. The greater percentage of e-mail addresses you can collect, the more sales you will make.

### **Do you ask them to sign up for your newsletter?**

The beauty of the Internet is that you can treat visitors like friends without spending time with each one -- if you've set up your Web site properly.

Newsletters are an important part of your online marketing mix. Your visitors show up because they have some interest in what you do. It makes sense that they will continue to have some interest in that topic after they leave. A newsletter is a good way to fulfill that interest -- and keep your name in front of them for weeks or months to come.

Newsletters should provide information they might find useful or interesting. If you sell health products, a few short paragraphs about new health research will be welcome. Look for a way to tie the "story" to your products or firm. If the research mentions the value of antioxidants, mention at the end of the story, perhaps in italics to set it off, that you carry the leading brands of antioxidants. Keep it very short, and don't oversell. You're just providing a little more information.

Opinions vary about the length. Our research suggests that visitors favor short, one page newsletters with subheads for four to seven stories. They will scan it, so keep it simple, with short sentences. Use bullet points. Provide links to the Web sites related to the information. And keep it chatty and informal. Don't write a thesis. Try to find a funny story. And most of all pick stories that have a clear application to their lives. You want it to help create an image of your company as the "Best" in your field or market niche. If you can't do it right, don't do it at all. A poorly written or designed newsletter will just hurt your image, just like finding out that Dan Quayle couldn't spell 'potato.'

Give your newsletter a catchy name. That way when they see it in the e-mail "description" box, they won't bypass it. Try to send it out about twice a month, or even once a week if you can. Keep your name fresh in their minds without being too aggressive.

And if possible avoid ads. Remember, the purpose of the newsletter is to make them think nice thoughts about you, to respect you professionally, and to keep you in their active memory so they will remember to contact you when they want what you're selling. It's OK to gently remind them of the benefits you offer, but no hard sell. You want them to think of you as a friend, not a door-to-door salesman.

Newsletters can be your cheapest, most effective form of advertising to an interested audience, if you do them right.

### **Do you sell them on your newsletter with an excerpt and exciting copy?**

At one time, the online newsletter was a new and exciting idea. Now almost every company has one, and the idea isn't new anymore. Now you must show visitors why they will love to read your newsletter. Most of them already get more newsletters than they can read, and would like to get off half the lists if they could figure out how.

The best way to get people to sign up is to offer them a little sample. Pitch the newsletter, and present a sidebar with a few stories from a current newsletter. You don't need to show the entire newsletter, just a few stories or paragraphs to give them its flavor and make them want to read more. Remember that Safeway doesn't give away full size cinnamon buns, just little bites. If you want more, you buy one. The same lesson applies here.

### **Does the site offer additional benefits to the visitor (like freebies)?**

Think of your site as an investment for visitors. They show up and look at your home page. If it looks promising, they decide to invest some of their time in it. Now time is a precious possession for most people. They never have enough of it. If they are willing to risk some of it on your company, it is only fair that you insure they make a profit on their time. That way, they will feel good about your site (and company), not like they do about a slot machine that never pays off!

When they feel good about your company, you can build a relationship on that feeling.

What benefits can you offer to make their visit pay off? Information is one of the best things.

- \* Write a short Report on some subject related to your business, create a short Quiz ("*Test Your Knowledge Of . . .*"), or offer some tips ("*10 Ways to Negotiate Better Deals*").

- \* Put the information in an autoresponder and tell your visitors they can enjoy any of the following free online publications just by double clicking its name.

- \* Another benefit to consider is a coupon for discounts on your products. This is a good way to test several different offers and coupon language, too.

- \* You can also offer a free sample if that works for your product (health & beauty products often create new sales by giving away samples.)

- \* Offer them a chance to win a prize ("Register here to win a new Palm Pilot"). This will also help you gather e-mail addresses.

Whatever options you choose, be sure the benefits and freebies are worthwhile. Giving away cheap gifts or cheesy information will only hurt your reputation. It's the way to ruin a relationship, just as surely as giving cheap flowers or candy to a girlfriend.

### **Does the site offer numerous links to other relevant information?**

People really appreciate having suggestions for other sites that may be of interest to them. This is one of the differences between a pure 'selling' site and one that is organized for the customer's interests. It can help change their image of your site from that of a "salesman" to that of a "friend."

What kind of links to other sites should you offer? Naturally, you'll offer links to all of your affiliates, those sites that have links to your site and are promoting your products. Also helpful are omnibus sites related to your field. For example, if you offer health related products, links to sites like the American Cancer Society, the Chronic Fatigue Association, etc.

Give them a lot of different sites. That adds to the perceived value of YOUR site. Create the links, and be sure they work! Be sure to notify the sites that you have a link to them, and ask if they would reciprocate.

## **Section Fourteen: Outreach Marketing**

### **Does the site offer an affiliate plan?**

Having a well-designed, visitor-friendly Web site isn't enough to succeed any more than having a lavish bricks-and-mortar store. You must market your product or service -- online and offline.

One of the most inexpensive and most popular ways is 'affiliate marketing.' Affiliate marketing is like having salesmen working for you. And in some instances they are paid on a commission-only basis!

Affiliate plans are hot on the Web. They offer merchants a chance to have dozens or even thousands of people selling their wares. Affiliate plans let visitors to your site sign up to promote your products. For most people this just entails putting a link on their Web site to yours, along with a little copy about what you offer. Or they may just put your banner ad on their site. They may also promote it in a newsletter, and other online publications, or e-zines.

There are three ways in which affiliate programs are set up.

- (1) Affiliates are paid on the basis of page views. This is often not a good idea because you could end up paying commissions without getting any business.
- (2) Affiliates are paid on the basis of click-throughs. While this option has the same problem, at least you have their visitors on your site.
- (3) Affiliates are paid on the basis of sales. In other words, here your affiliates are salespersons working on a commission-only basis. If they don't sell, they don't get paid.

Amazon.com was one of the originators of the online affiliate program. Now Amazon has tens of thousands of affiliates -- each site has an Amazon button linked to a special code number. When a visitor clicks on the Amazon button and buys a book, CD, etc. (which that site may have recommended), the site owner gets a 5% commission. That's pretty good for doing nothing more than displaying a button and promoting a few books.

To make an affiliate program work for you, you must make it simple for people to sign up. It must be easy for your affiliate to check commissions, and see that you aren't cheating them. It must be automated -- you don't want to do all these calculations by hand! You must offer a good product and good customer service. And you must pay a decent commission (5% - 15% is the usual range.)

Don't be cheap. Think of this as "found money" that you would not have earned without their help. They are your partners, so treat them right if you want to keep them working for you.

Rather than try to do all the work yourself, consider using an outside company to handle the record keeping and payment chores. Commission Junction, BeFree, and LinkShare are major providers in this area. Whichever one you choose, or if you do it yourself, don't overlook the benefits of an affiliate program.

### **Does the site use co-branding to reduce costs and increase the number of visitors?**

You've seen co-branding a thousand times, even if you didn't know what it was called. When you watch a McDonald's commercial that features the latest action figures tied to a new

Walt Disney film, that's co-branding. McDonald's and Disney share the cost of the ads, and both benefit from being associated with the other.

You can do the same thing. Co-branding makes the most sense when you have a partner in a related business -- like a women's apparel store partnered with a women's shoe store. When you both sell the same person different, related products, that is a potential co-branding partner.

### **Does the site allow you to tell your friends about the site?**

Ever found a site that you just loved, and knew a friend or co-worker would also? Most likely you had to write down or 'copy' the URL, pull up your e-mail . . . in other words, a lot of bother. Visitor-friendly sites let them send your site to a friend with just a click or two. The link to the e-mail reminder should be clear and prominent. Don't let them overlook it.

And be sure to remind your visitors that some of their friends would appreciate the tip. In retail, your best sales people are happy customers. The same is true online. Don't lose that sales pitch by making it hard for them to give it.

### **Does the site encourage viral marketing?**

'Viral marketing' is a terrible term which basically means passing information to others, the same way that a cold is spread. Viral marketing is somewhat different than 'friends telling friends' in that people reach out to a wider circle than their friends (even to people they don't know), and often they are rewarded for their help. The key to a good viral marketing strategy is to offer information which people will want to share with others -- interesting research, great tips, a funny story, some valuable deal.

Imagine that you find a site, or receive an e-mail newsletter from a company, which tells you how to be more efficient, gives you insights into your customers, tells you a cute story, and includes a coupon for 25% off the purchase of a business product or service you could use. Wouldn't you want to pass that on to friends, colleagues, and others you don't even know in your profession? Sure you would. And if you were entered in a drawing for a new Palm Pilot for each e-mail name you sent it to, you'd be even more motivated.

Viral marketing can be a very good, low cost strategy for many businesses.

### **Does the site offer information for potential advertisers?**

When you build traffic, others may be willing to pay you for access to those eyeballs. Be sure that you make it easy for them to reach you. Give them a link to get more information about your site, the traffic you are getting, and your rates, if you've established them. Don't miss out on an opportunity to make money because you didn't have the information advertisers were looking for.

## **Section Fifteen: Getting Found**

### **Do you rely on search engines to attract visitors?**

If so, you may be making a big mistake. Here's why:

- (1) Search engines use different mathematical formulas to determine rankings, and they change them regularly. That means even if you are in the Top Ten this week, next week you could be out of sight.
- (2) Other people are trying to take your spot, and they are trying to do it every day. Chances are you won't be able to survive that onslaught for long, even if you are working at it every day. Some engines are now selling their top spots, making it even harder to rank high.
- (3) Most people only look at the first page of a search engine's listings. If they use a meta search engine like DogPile that searches several search engines at one time, they are even more unlikely to go to the second page of any of them. That means if you are on the second page or the fifty-second page, it doesn't matter much, you still won't get much traffic out of that search engine.

Don't rely on search engines to save you, but be sure you register regularly. Get professional help in selecting the best key words, descriptions, and other codes that will put you as high as possible in the listings. Most people never look past the first ten entries, so don't forget about other types of online and offline marketing.

Search engines are an important part of your online marketing strategy, but they should not be your only, or even your most important, marketing channel. There are numerous other ways that are more likely to drive traffic to your site. For an excellent resource on understanding search engines, go to [www.searchenginewatch.com](http://www.searchenginewatch.com).

### **Does the site provide important metatags, "key words" and page titles for search engines to accurately categorize your site?**

Your Web site designer should be familiar with the metatags that search engine 'spiders' look for when evaluating your site. These electronic evaluators look at metatags, key words, descriptions, etc. as an important way of determining your ranking.

For example, if you sell women's ergonomic shoes and use that as three of your key words, when a person looking for shoes types in those three words, your site should come up on the list, somewhere. The trick is selecting the right key words, descriptions of your site content, page titles, and first 50 - 250 words on your homepage, etc. to gain a high ranking on several different searches.

## **Do you use many different types of online and offline marketing strategies to pull people to your site?**

Your Web site marketing plan should not be a “one note tune.” It should include many different types of marketing, both online and offline. In addition to search engines, here are just some of the other ways you should consider using to increase traffic. Evaluate each one and ask if it is right for your product and your budget.

\* Opt-In e-mail marketing: This is not spam. You send these e-mails to lists of people who have given permission to send them information about certain types of products or services. Purchase these lists from reputable companies. Opt-In e-mails have a significantly higher response rate than banners, but they are not cheap. The more targeted they are, the more expensive they become.

\* Bulletin Boards: There are over one hundred thousand bulletin boards on the Web, specializing in every interest imaginable. Find some that attract people who may be interested in your products or services. Usually it is not good form to submit messages that are really advertising. But you can offer useful information and mention your company. Some bulletin boards also accept advertising. And some are just advertising. One good library site to look at is <http://websearch.about.com>

\* Join an e-group. Similar to a bulletin board, but may offer more features, including resources for members. Joining is free. Look at <http://www.egroups.com/> for a list.

\* Articles in Newsletters: There are a huge number of specialized online newsletters, too. Many of them will accept submissions from others. It is a good way to get your name before people who are interested in your type of product, and a good way to help build your image as an expert. Be sure to read several articles others have written, and ask for any writers' guidelines that may be available. You'll find a huge list of newsletters at <http://e-newsletters.internet.com/descriptions.html>.

\* Advertising in Newsletters: Many newsletters also accept advertising. For a relatively small investment, you can put your sales pitch before a highly targeted group of people. Remember, you aren't trying to sell them, just get them interested enough to click on your Web site link.

\* Banner ads: Banners can drive traffic to your site. Figure the cost carefully. If you don't want to pay, consider a banner ad exchange service, like <http://www.looksmartclicks.com/>.

\* Box ads: Text-only ads (or with a small graphic) in boxes, often found on the right side of the page. Readership and click-through is higher because it looks like editorial, not an ad.

\* Affiliate programs: A good way to get people working for you on a commission-only basis (see above). Go to <http://www.linkshare.com/> for help and ideas.

\* Online Auctions: Auction off a product or service to build familiarity with your company.

Whatever ways you choose to marketing your site online, heed the words of direct mail marketers: The three most important rules of successful marketing are: Test. Test. Test.

You should test everything you do -- headlines, body copy, offer, graphics, etc. Vary only one variable at any time so you can tell what made the difference. The difference between a good and a bad headline (or any other part of your pitch) can have a ten-fold impact on your success rate. So keep testing.