BUSINESS MANAGEMENT MASTER CLASS SERIES

Internet Development

The Bigger Picture: Existing Sites and eMarketing

You've built your new website, had your launch party, mistakenly paid for search engine inclusion and you're now looking forward to reaping the rewards of your efforts. However, now is not the time to put your feet up and relax – your journey into the mysterious world of the Digital Marketing has only just begun. One of your first hesitant steps should be to maximise your visibility on search engines…

As discussed in the previous post, search engine visibility is influenced by a number of factors including: tags within the page itself, the content of the page, the time it takes for a page to lead, links from other sites, keeping the site fresh etc. However, search engine visibility itself is often greatly over-valued. A site could feasibly attract vast numbers of hits and yet deliver little revenue increase.

From the outset it is wise to remember that the site is part of an overall marketing mix. Traditional and digital marketing methods should be used to direct the right type of visitor to the site. Having attracted the right type of visitor, the focus should be to convert leads to sales as rapidly as possible, as well as to get customers to return and purchase again. This means having effective back office processes in place to action leads and a genuine commitment to customer service excellence.

Measuring Success

As a manager one of your first priorities should be to ensure that you have information to answer some of your questions. Where are your visitors going / how do they behave / how are they finding the site? What do they like? What are they ignoring? What annoys them? Who are they?

Perhaps the most common solution is to look to your site's web logs for inspiration. It is true that it is possible to spend a great deal of time and money analysing web logs. It is not true that web logs record an accurate picture of what is happening. Do you really want to base business decisions on a partial or distorted view of reality? If you do then go ahead and start what will be a long process of deriving non-meaning from what can be a vast volume of data.

What's wrong with web logs? Without getting too technical – plenty. If you adjust your browser settings to never refresh, or access via an ISP that dynamically assigns IP addresses, or press F5 to refresh, or use a strict personal firewall, or browse via a proxy server with harsh caching enabled, or disable cookies you are potentially helping to corrupt web logs. There are a host of technical reasons to explain why web logs

consistently fail to log web activity including the difficulty of differentiating between human and automated traffic. Remember: there are lies, dammed lies and web logs.

Some managers tend to have an instinctive need to analyse "stuff" and generate hefty reports to be presented to the board, for them this lack of information is clearly an issue. So, if you can't report on web logs what can you report on?

Do you know for example how much of the time your site is up and running? Your ISP tells you that it's 99.999% of the time. Do you believe them? Can you prove otherwise? Do you know your search engine ranking in comparison with your competitors? (Bearing in mind that this may change on a daily basis). Do you know how quickly a visitor can access your site using different devices at different times of the day and from different locations if global? Do you know how people found the site? (Did they find it themselves or did you direct them to it?) Did your web site win the business or should the credit really go the news ad that you ran recently or perhaps to the sales person that took them to lunch last Wednesday?

If you really feel the need to track the movements of your visitors in minute, big-brother style detail you will need to force them to log in as individuals. Add cookies to the mix (small files used to identify what people are doing) and you can track every click down to the nearest millisecond. For the ultimate snoop experience, you can visually record and playback every mouse movement and click as users navigate through your site. If you really want to be truly obsessive, then go down the "ad-ware" route. Ad-ware utilities can be used to track where someone goes when they leave your site. They sit there running in the background gathering information and send back reports to the originating site on a regular basis. Cool? No. Not at all cool – there is little difference between a virus and an ad-ware utility…

It can be tempting to think that just because you can generate lots of tangible, numeric reports, you should. Google Analytics and similar tracking solutions can help you to generate a bewildering range of reports. But just for a moment consider this; perhaps the real meaning that you seek can't be measured in hard tangible terms alone. Traditional methods of evaluating market response become even more important when throwing a web site into the equation. Put simply, if you want to know what's really happening, a user's subjective experience of your site – ask them verbally and remember that a web site does not generally exist in isolation!

The Role of eMail Marketing

Having accepted that your web presence should be integrated within your existing marketing strategy it can still be tempting to believe that your web presence will dramatically reduce marketing overheads. In theory social posts, eNews letters, interactive content, web casts and eMail campaigns should all reduce the need for paper-based communications. In theory…

The reality is that more traditional sales and marketing methods remain as important as ever. However, eMarketing does have a vital role to play within the mix, but that contribution is not necessarily a positive one. Consider eMail for a moment: it's cheap, it's fast, it's relatively easy… and potentially very, very annoying.

If you wish to explore eMail as a communications medium a few basic guidelines should be adhered to:

Don't buy in lists of eMail addresses from a third party. Why? The quality is likely to be very poor and you certainly don't have explicit permission to eMail the people from such lists. For GDPR compliant B2C campaigns you need explicit permission, for B2B campaigns you might be able to argue justifiable use and play the "legitimate interest" card. Many would argue however that you don't have explicit permission, you're sending spam or junk eMail. Junk eMail often ends up in junk eMail folders and no-one will read it. Therefore, why bother in the first place?

Assuming that you have a database (see a previous post covering Database Quality), you should be recording: eMail address data; what people are interested over time; what they have given you permission to do with their eMail address; and what you have sent to them / when. Please note that one of the mailing preference options should not be "to flog your eMail address on the open market so that other people can send you junk eMail". Please also note that permission to send a monthly update newsletter does not give you an implicit right to make weekly telephone follow-up calls or to send eMails on a twice daily basis.

One "cool" idea is to let your web site users update their own preferences online, perhaps via a link sent to them in every eMail that you send them. At the same time, you could also let people update their own address etc details. Whilst it is true that some people would take advantage of such a service in a responsible manner, some people would use the facility to corrupt their records to prevent junk eMail and post from being delivered.

One counter argument to the above is that if people don't want to be sent eMails all they need to do is to click on the "remove me" link. The flaw with this reasoning is that users are often well educated against clicking on such links because they know that if they do they will simply get more junk eMail than ever before. (If you can click on the link then the eMail got through, if the eMail got through then it is valid, if it is validated it can be sold-on at a premium).

If you do insist on sending broadcast eMails, assuming that you have database cleaning processes in place (that work), assuming that you can segment by interest / preference, assuming that you can record what was sent to whom / when (to avoid overlaps), and assuming that you're honouring opt-outs religiously you're ready to add to a growing river of ePollution. But only if you keep it small (very few images), don't send attachments, send 1:1 (no lists), keep it simple (no flashy animations / Javascript), link to your web site, give people "free {useful} stuff", triple check the spelling and provide the usual "remove me" links. Should your eMail message get through at all (past a variety of hurdles designed to block spam) you stand a chance of not being <u>too</u> annoying.

(A few brief technical notes: If you're sending as abc@def.com and you're sending domain is www.ghi.com most filters will treat your eMail as spam. Any product claiming to be able to pre-validate eMail addresses is being "optimistic"; most servers are configured not to allow validation in advance of sending and will sometimes send back false negatives. Also be aware that some eMail marketing products claim to be able to process bounce notifications – which is great, but do realise that many servers are configured to respond with an anonymous notification i.e. no mention is made of the eMail address that the eMail was sent to or will not respond at all).

Linking it all together

Integrating your web presence into your business is probably what will make or break your Digital Marketing strategy. This means ensuring that every communication out of your business includes a link to your web site (i.e. social posts, blog posts, emails, letters, faxes, business cards, compliment slips, invoices, receipts, newspaper adverts, broadcasts, merchandise…). It also means ensuring that everyone in the organisation can quote the site's address (URL) at will without needing to hunt around for a post-it note. If you have sister companies or affiliates you should ensure that they are linking to your site. (The more high-quality links you have from other reputable sites the better your ranking will be in search engines).

Banner advertisers charge remarkable sums of money for the privilege of splashing your ad at the top of one of their pages. They do increase your visibility and will almost certainly increase traffic to your site. However, it is wise to remember that surfers are getting very good at ignoring banner ads and may even fear clicking on them. There is also a growing market in software and browser plugins that prevents banner ads from being displayed in the first place. If you do choose to invest in banner ads, then bargain hard if possible and make a point of reporting in detail on leads directly attributed to this source. As with all forms of advertising if you're not getting a reasonable lead to sale conversion rate then why bother?

If you're still celebrating when your site makes its first birthday you're heading in the right direction. Cause for celebration would be a high hit => lead => sale => return sale ratios, positive customer feedback and web development expenditure within budget. But don't party too hard, because unless you continue to do all the right things at the right time for the right reasons you may not be celebrating for long…

Audience: Non-technical business managers – all sectors
Length: 1800+ words
Basis: All right restricted. Free of charge if the details below (inclusive
               of URL) are published essentially as is. Otherwise £180 GBP.

Neuro Innovations Consulting is a business consultancy with experience covering digital marketing, web development, database management, database marketing, CRM, eMail marketing, database quality management, systems development, e-Commerce, web development, change management and business process design.

https://www.neuroinnovations.com