

Web sites worth more if they're changed regularly

WHAT IS YOUR WEB SITE worth? Chances are, if you haven't taken a good look at it for many months or even years, it may not be reaching its full potential. The value of a Web site is often found in a company's willingness to change it.

You wouldn't buy a new car and not maintain it with regular oil changes and check-ups. Nor would you buy a great new outfit and not wear it with different shirts and accessories. In essence, your Web site can always be a fabulous new wardrobe — engaging, yet affordable. The greatest strength of a Web site is its real-time ability to evolve and change with the business. A lot of companies don't take advantage of the opportunity to keep it exciting and fresh — reflective of changes in their business and current business climate.

Simple changes

Here are some examples of simple changes that helped some companies get more out of their Web sites, and see better returns on their investment.

The Giant Screen Theater Association (www.giantscreentheater.com) had a significant amount of content on its Web site. The content needed to be separated in a useable way for its members and non-members, who are very visual (large format movie-makers), and technologically savvy. By incorporating a well-thought-out navigation structure, flash motion and sound, video clips, rotating dot-gif images, and

translations in four languages, the association created an exciting new image that is reaching a far more global audience.

The association now uses the site more effectively to communicate industry news to its members on a daily basis. It also incorporated an online survey to analyze industry trends, and define appropriate business strategies. Between 2002 and 2003, GSTA had a 45 percent increase in online conference registrations, which helped it lower overhead costs and increase conference attendance. Traffic to the site has risen greatly, and potential new members are targeted more closely.

[tips] 1 | Web sites are great for decreasing a function repeatedly performed by staff, such as giving directions to your office.

2 | Look for trends in client requests. Can some be handled more efficiently via your site?

3 | Analyze the sites of your competition before refurbishing your own.

Benefits Incorporated (www.benefitsincorporated.com) started with a simple site, which worked very well, according to Jim Alt, president and owner. An extensive re-design of the corporate site was conducted later to give the company better presence on the Internet. It unwittingly produced a number of high-quality inquiries, and led to some collateral consulting work.

A second password-protected Web site was established for the company's clients to enable them to update their employee eligibility online. It has helped the company maintain and strengthen its client base, and cemented a relationship with a sizeable new client.

High Point Creative (www.highpointcreative.com) has discovered significant return on investment in a new extranet/intranet system. As a creative marketing communications company, it transfers extremely large graphic files between staff and customers. Owner Kate Huebsch says the new system allows them to show their work easily to customers, and store the files in a virtual space that staff members can access quickly. The redesigned site also presents a better picture of what the company offers, and that has helped them reach targeted customers who are more likely to close a sale.

But every business is different, and not everyone needs rotating images, flash motion or even extranets. Here are some tips on determining a business strategy for your Web site, a rea-

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sonable budget, and expected returns on your investment.

Assuming that your site is first and foremost a marketing brochure-ware tool, you can expect it will gain credibility for your business, and perform an internal service. Beyond that, it should decrease an operation that is repeatedly performed by internal staff (such as giving directions to the office), and meet client needs, especially when a client-request trend has been noticed. Also, Web content that adds value to your key accounts will solidify business relationships and revenue.

Developmental steps:

- Review your overall business plan and marketing strategies. Determine your business goals, and how a Web site can fulfill strategies that serve those goals.

- Budget for a site. While it's easy to pull together a "storefront" with text, photos and contact information, a Web site reflects your company image and is often a customer's first impression of you. A design that fits your company brand is as important as the content you will deliver. A good range to budget for is \$5,000 to \$40,000, with some projects going over \$60,000.

- Calculate your return. A company Web site should do some of the following: create a strong brand identity with a professional Web site design; lower overhead because of operational effectiveness; increase sales opportunities because of value-added services, such as public and private resources (to include e-commerce) that create trusting relationships with customers.

Finally, the best Web site is not going

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— Suzanne McGann, Voyageur Information Technology

- Pair your sales/marketing and operational objectives to determine internal and external Web site strategies. Analyze the audience you are trying to reach, and how you can provide value to those people through online information or tools. (It is also good to analyze your competition). Expect some help in this area from your Web developer, who can present various technologies and ideas to fulfill these goals.

- Consider ongoing maintenance needs. Many companies want the Web developer to handle maintenance because of time constraints. But a Web developer can also build a site so that it can be managed in-house. The goal here is to make sure the site remains fresh and appealing to your audience. It depends on your budget and staffing situation.

to bring results if it can't be found. Web developers can help you with search optimization services, some of which are free and others cost money. Expect the Web developer to bring ideas to the planning stages that can help your business grow. And remember your options. A great outfit looks good with a wide variety of shirts and accessories.

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