
Winning Big with the Internet and E-Commerce

Internet Marketing and E-Commerce have captivated our minds, motivations, and money making obsessions. For the last two years, publicly traded E-Commerce companies, “dot com’s,” have stolen the limelight with their meteoric rises in value beyond all comparison with their revenues or profits. (Valuations have adjusted down, but they’re still well in excess of traditional model.)

The “*brick-and-mortar*” based product and service companies are told the Internet will be their absolute undoing. Mad, frenetic rushes to stake clear claim to Internet users and “killer applications” is the driving concern of businessmen and women in every industry.

It’s intimidating, inhibiting, frustrating, and perplexing to most. Exhilarating, stimulating and enriching to a few.

One thing is certain.

The advent of the Internet has forever changed the way business is conducted in every industry in every free marketing economy in the world. The “*grand slam*” winner, hands down, is certainly the consumer. ***But how can you and your business or practice win big, too... now and ongoing with the Internet and E-Commerce?***

Well, I’ve got a few good ideas and strategic suggestions to offer here: Understand what I’m about to share are my best-reasoned, current perspectives; drawn from practical, day-to-day observations, research, interviews, and analysis, my staff and I have made — reduced down to its core basic essence. So there’s absolutely no confusion or tentativeness on your part about what I am recommending, why I’m recommending it — and what specific actions or implications my various recommendations call for you to take. Consider this document my executive action briefing.

Your time is precious. And we are moving in “Internet Time,” where 3 months is the equivalent of a year. So let’s get on with it, now.

Let me start with some universal principles that I believe you must master in order to have the absolute, most powerful impact possible from whatever Internet presence your business establishes on the “net.”

Always ask yourself this question: ***Why is somebody going to want to come to my company’s web site?***

You must clearly, immediately, and effectively telegraph right up front, on the home page at the top — that your web site offers that visitor the only viable solution or strategy to effectively solve the problem or opportunity they’re after. If you don’t have a great value proposition to pose, there are numerous other sites, that are just as well suited to resolve the problem being presented and you only have between 1 to 2 minutes to convey this message before the consumer moves on to the next option.

This *is* obvious, and if your goal for having a web site is anything beyond merely providing a continuous connection between your “*brick-and-mortar*” business and your existing clientele — you need to strategically focus on search engines, affiliate programs, and strategies to generate maximum upside marketing leverage. We’ll deal with affiliate programs later, because let’s face it, most people use search engines, directories, and portals to find what they are looking for on the Web. So, let’s first focus your attention on the ways of getting your web site to come up in search sites, legitimately, and as high as possible.

Indexing the Web is a difficult and non-ending task. It takes thousands of electronic scouts (called bots or spiders) visiting as many web sites as they can every week analyzing the text for keywords and following hypertext links trying to gather information. The information that is collected will be indexed and used to rank the web sites for potential consumer searches.

Your goal is to not only show up in these searches but to be placed as high as possible in these rankings.

It is crucially important that search sites know that you are out there and want to be part of their index. Almost all *Web Search Sites* and *Directories* send out some sort of electronic scout that will go out and find your site, but they also have a button that allows you a chance to register your site or pages with them. Some sites simply require your URL to be added to the route of their electronic scouts, while other Search Engines will allow you to fill out a form with site location, keywords and a short description.

Of course, finding, going to, and registering on each individual Search Site can waste quite a lot of time and energy, and isn't entirely necessary. But, if you want your site indexed at as many appropriate sites as possible, you could use a Web site Submittal Service such as SubmitIt.com, or www.usaworld.com (These sites used to be free, but now they usually charge a fee for their services.)

Just getting a consumer to your site is not enough. You want to be able to communicate and stay in touch with them, as well as keep them coming back over and over to see what's new on your site. And the best way of keeping the communication lines open is to build a list of e-mail addresses you can dialogue with.

How do you go about building this list?

You must systematically cultivate willingness on the part of your clients and prospects to give you their e-mail addresses and, most importantly, permission to communicate with them periodically. You can use this communication to inform, instruct, educate, comment, or alert them to development opportunities or exciting information that will bring them greater benefit, advantage, or outright payoff value to their lives or business.

You need to cultivate this e-mail list for two strategically critical reasons. First, to gain highest impact and access to them on a direct and continual basis. Second, besides the direct access that permission-based e-mail communication affords, the cost is almost zero, vs. every other expensive communication alternative you could choose. You also have 24-hour, 7-day a week direct access. And, if you always assure that your e-mails contain superb intrinsic value — your recipients will eagerly await, embrace, and best of all, respond to your e-mail dispatches.

E-mails must not be the only way you deliver value. Your site must also find an effective and powerful way to give something of value — be it information, ideas, content, education, entertainment, advance intelligence, etc. — **free** — before trying to sell or ask for any commitment.

You should do regular user studies of how user friendly, easily usable, fluid, and eminently clear your web site is to people other than you and your team. Frequently, you get deluded to thinking your web site is a lot more appealing, user friendly, clear, valuable, and appealing to the marketplace than it really is. Only by performing a series of cold, objective web usability studies, can you discover the truth.

Depending upon the results of your user studies, and how your web site is designed to be used — consider using your site in multiple ways. Expand your applications, and gain the benefits of multi-purposing.

Focus your attention on serving your primary client or extolling all the benefits, advantages, applications or implications of your main product or service in action.

If it has occurred to you that your primary clients are not the only ones that would benefit from your site — you are right!

***Finding effective ways to put your web site
into other people's web site***

Your web site must be known... a billboard in the basement is not an effective form of advertisement. Showing up on the first page of a search engine's results isn't the only way to get visitors to show up on your site. They also follow links from other related sites.

Figuring out the best ways to ethically tap into other web sites' existing traffic:

- Figure out what your customers are interested in
- Understand the customer's online behavior and existing traffic patterns
- Let the customers drive you to where they go
- Then, find a generous, exciting way to reward these other web sites for sending qualified visitors and prospects over to your site.

How can you stimulate an effective, ethical affiliate program?

Prepare a full "turnkey" package that is easily and instantly applicable as well as financially and transactionally appealing. Where appropriate, offer compensations such as: reciprocity, return links, compensated links, or pay-per-performance link. (For some additional ideas on setting up affiliate relationships, you may want to revisit some of my earlier work on host-beneficiary/strategic alliance/endorsements.)

The key factors most critical to developing a powerful and effective web site business strategy

First, focus on marketing—your web site must be known to all your existing clients, to all your primary prospects within your industry, and on as many search engines and affiliate-based web site referral programs as possible. Always focus on getting the highest and best results yield and impact from whatever it is you do.

It's critically important.

It's honesty and innovation, today on the Internet, that is even more important than the quality of the product or service you're offering. Please don't compromise quality and performance characteristics in whatever product or service you offer — but, first and foremost, put attention on the effectiveness of the web site marketing approach you put behind your Internet or E-Commerce business efforts.

- Clearly understand your target client's needs, wants and objectives.
- Always remember you are giving people the opportunity to effectively solve their needs — not promoting an economic solution to your needs.
- Always do what your clients need done.
- Don't try and force them to accept your definition of value and usefulness in the message. Content and payoff value is what you provide them on your web site.
- Make it easy to do what the person visiting your site came there to do — and make it faster and more effective for them to do it at your site than anywhere else.

Just like when you are trying to set up affiliate relations, you must take the time and interest to carefully and clearly understand your visitor's or client's online behavior. It is easier to figure out what the clients like and dislike if you find out their existing traffic patterns and participate in discussion or chat groups that relate to your market and ask questions about product or service traits people are looking for or are staying away from.

Create an e-zine (electronic magazine) or electronic newsletter. This is an inexpensive way to build and bond the development process to, and with, new prospects, as well as advance and enhance the bond you have with current or inactive clients. Or, offer some promotional software or games, some sort of low cost item that is specific to the market you are looking for, that you can encourage visitors to pass along to others who may share the same interest or needs.

Narrowing Your Focus

If you are struggling with what positioning to take for your web site presence, consider taking a niche focus, or at very least, devoting segments of your web site to a highly niche-focused subject matter. The narrower your focus, the more directly you can talk to your market.

Whether you are using your site for free content or as a revenue generator, remember: The more niche-focused your web site is, the more appealing it becomes to visitors. It's also easier for the market you're trying to reach to locate your site--and the more acceptable it is to charge for products or services you sell on the site.

What's working in your area of promotion?

Remember on the Internet, "now" is a moving target. So, because of such rapid, constant change, innovative, and acute competition at every level — you must continually test and retest every marketing or selling approach or assumption you apply. That duly stated, here are some excellent concepts to think about trying:

First, you must recognize that having loads of traffic is often a deceptive illusion and has absolutely no correlation to actual commerce and revenue being generated, particularly for non-advertising driven web sites. A lot of traffic usually means you're spending a ton of money, buying visitors and low margin clients.

On the Internet, especially, concentrate your efforts, wherever possible and practical, on finding and establishing frequent visitors. Then build a strong trusted relationship you can turn into meaningful future profit or strategic ethical advantage for your business.

Try and get other businesses, organizations, or individuals that have a good quality e-mail list to recommend your company, products, or services to their e-mail list. (It is just like doing an endorsed mailing.)

Work on what is called tangibilizing, or building a credibility of your product, company and web site presence. The Internet and most web sites are very intangible things. If the user doesn't trust your site, there are hundreds of other sites out there that can offer the same products or services. Remember that the user is in charge on the Internet—so tangibilize your web site as much as possible and wherever possible.

- Put your firm's physical address on all your web pages.
- Put your signature on your welcoming letter on your web site home page.
- If appropriate, put a recording of yourself on your web site.

Work carefully and continuously to build as many levels and layers of credibility in your web site presentation and content. Remember, on the Internet, more importantly than anything else, you must build your credibility. Because, in the end, it all comes down to which site the users trust!

Don't recreate the wheel — Study what other industries (and your competitors) are doing on the web

Learn from competitors' web sites. Study related sites of companies outside your direct competitive field, but in similar types of endeavors. Continuously refresh your knowledge base by re-visiting these other sites. Find out who's out there, who's better, more sensitive, innovative, responsive, and let them help educate, improve, and inspire you to make your web site better.

Do you even know your own local, regional, national, and international competition? Do you try and see, not only who and what's out there, but what they are doing and how many different ways they're doing it, too? You must start doing that, immediately, if you want your web site to really succeed and prosper.

Most people don't bother to let their competition educate them. Believe me, you really need to see what's out there, who's pointing at you and why they're doing it. You need to look at the competition.

Here are some web sites you should visit, study, monitor, and some of the key observations you should really identify and understand when you're there visiting each site:

Amazon.com —

- The way they make everything “do-able” in 3 clicks or less.
- Their ability to tell you what other people, buying your chosen book, are also buying.
- Their ability to tell you how popular a given book is as well as posting actual reviews — good, bad or indifferent—to help you make a balanced decision.

CD Now —

- Lets you listen to tracks online before you purchase.

Net Mechanic —

- Because it's simple.

Web Position —

- Offers good tools to use, lots of freebies.

Alert Box —

- Uses “Reverse Pyramid” concept. They give the best...first!

Excite, Amazon, ESPN.com —

- All three give users customization ability.

Goto.com —

- They solved the problem of how to get on top of the search engines.

Biztravel.com —

- Personalize and customize travel plans according to your needs.

Dell Computer —

- They anticipate your every question and credibly assist you in making a decision.

What are some business models that are working?

- A.) Selling content — Downloadable or proprietary services no one else can offer, match or deliver at the price or in the manner you can, selling information you can move over the wires — intellectual property is an excellent business model to consider.
- B.) Integrate “*brick-and-mortar*” world with the Internet. Reel.com videos are delivered through “*brick-and-mortar*” facility.
- C.) Use the Internet to access and penetrate markets, people and niches not cost effectively accessible in the terrestrial world.

Nobody really knows just how big a factor the Internet will ultimately become, but it’s essential your business make a concerted commitment to having a meaningful and ethical presence on the Internet. Don’t wait to get started. As soon as you are up and going, don’t spend too much focus and time trying to generate a single, one-time sale. You no longer can afford to do that. You must focus on building a repeat purchasing process called “stickiness.” People must come back. You must realize full residual value and maximize payoff for your Internet web site efforts.

Don’t be intimidated by the “big boys”

What do you do if you’re a business competing against a far larger, far better capitalized and staffed company? Don’t retreat. You’ve got a lot more going for you than you even imagined. Smaller businesses have agility, responsiveness, empathy, and sensitivity to their markets’ true needs and wants. You can move faster and go left when the behemoth goes right. You can add the human touch to counter the automated world big business dispenses. You need to humanize focus on de-mechanizing.

Don’t be intimidated by the “big boys.” Typically, they don’t understand a new medium like the Internet. The bigger the competition, the better. The bigger the Internet gets, the less they respond to the customers, and the less they focus on the people. Your client — fall in love with that visitor/client! Personalize and customize your visitor’s experience when possible. Also, use the phone. Most of the big Internet companies don’t do it!

Remember — the Internet is profoundly market driven. The client/visitor “rules.” So be totally and absolutely responsive, absolutely courteous, respectful, enthusiastic and sensitive.

It all comes down, surprisingly, not to technology, but to people. Technology is not the problem confusing people. Everything successful is geared around the client. It’s all about knowing the client, knowing their interests, and being able to do that so effectively that no one else can come close to you.

Remember this —the Internet is all about communication. Establish an effective way you can communicate with your clients and prospects through your web site and e-mail presence — and your business will grow.

Ask yourself these reflective questions:

- 1.) ***What are the three most important reasons people are coming to your web site?*** Why to you — what’s the payoff? Is it well enough explained, defined, known?
- 2.) ***Are you afraid of making mistakes?*** Don’t be! An unsuccessful test is not failure. It’s only part of the accelerated learning curve.
- 3.) ***Are you honestly prepared to put your clients first?*** If you want to successfully do business on the Internet, you need to be prepared, as seriously as possible, to meet your clients’ needs head-on.
- 4.) ***Is your communication style clear and concise?*** Your communication style must be short sentences. Big payoff paragraphs. Subject lines (*when using e-mail*) and headlines should send a clear powerful, appealing payoff message about who, what, and why you care about the client.

- 5.) ***Is your site user friendly?*** Use plain English. Write at an 8th grade level. Don't exaggerate. Be real, be yourself and make your site as tangible as possible. Take all the puff and hype out of your communications, graphics and writings. Talk face-to-face. First person. One-to-one. You-to-me. Me-to-you.

Your web site must bring people benefits, advantages, information, education, entertainment, time or money savings, expertise, perspective, access, insight or some other truly competitive-edge advantage you can define, explain, and most essentially maintain for your web site to become truly successful.

More Important Realizations You Have to Acknowledge

Read Seth Godin's wonderful book, *Permission Marketing*, at least twice. It will set the criteria for your e-mail strategy to all your current and future web site visitors and clients.

Find innovative, appealing ways to put people together in a sense of community. In other words, where people with similar needs, desires and goals, problems, requests or profiles can turn for clear, effective, meaningful answers and information.

Recognize, too, that every good web site is also a great database you can segment, target, and niche-market to and through. Don't minimize the importance and opportunity this powerful, yet frequently overlooked, distinction affords.

If your web site is a selling site — and your products or services are delivered offsite, meaning not downloadable online — you must win the ground war of delivery, fulfillment and performance aspects of the product. In other words, you must get the product quickly delivered, installed and implemented.

Remember, too, that whatever it is you sell or do on the Internet — ultimately, it's not about getting the sale — it's about winning clients and loyalty for life. Big distinction, here.

When securing your client or web site visitor's permission to continuously communicate with them, please remember — permission is always in the eyes of the beholder. If you breach the client's sense of what they've given you permission to do — you've broken the relationship, forever.

Know that your Internet marketing efforts, your web site structure, and content is a process not a static destination. You'll probably never have everything exactly the way you want it, because by then, the market, competition, and state of technology will all have changed and you'll need to rework your entire thinking all over again. So, see the Internet and your web site as a perpetual *work-in-progress*. You'll enjoy the journey and all the attendant experiences and discovery adventures that go along with it, that much more.

After you've read *Permission Marketing*, move on to *Digital Darwinism* by Evan I. Schwartz. It teaches you to try and create an Internet site that business people see as solving a major problem for them.

If you don't know what you're doing on the Internet — find someone who does — but who shares your values and goals — and who can capably translate "Techese" over to "Humanese" — then engage them and pay them what they are worth to help you, making certain to put a portion of their compensation in the form of performance benchmark progress or success payments, when critically agreed-upon objectives and/or timetables they're responsible for helping you achieve are satisfactorily met.

If your Internet web site is business-to-business, make certain your buying and transaction process is easy, fast, clear, appealing and effective — for the buyer or visitor's use — not for you. Focus on building a better business-to-business process than whatever current choices are out there.

When developing an Internet web site — always think about the brand you're creating. Today, a brand should, more than anything, stand for the value, information and assistance being offered to the client.

When creating your web site and creating your brand, try and do something no one else can do. Ask yourself, how can you do something creative with your web site?

Visitors will tolerate 8 seconds for a page to come up and 30 seconds for navigation. Make yours more difficult and they won't stay or pay — period!

Always remember that you build your web site for your clients, not for you. It's for them.

In summary:

- 1.) Recognize that the world has changed. The Internet is a different means of communication than you and your clients have used before.
- 2.) It's really taking over a good part of attention and influence in every industry so don't minimize its relevance to you.
- 3.) The more I talk to big businesses, the more excited I get for small-to-medium businesses, like yours, on the Internet.
- 4.) It's a pre-emptive means by which your company can, in fact, more swiftly take over or dominate your industry — if done right.
- 5.) On a big scale, being able to do business online is a huge customer service saver and advantage to both sides.
- 6.) When people want to ask a question, give them a way to filter and receive quality answers. Include Frequently Asked Questions page. Include e-mail and phone number to contact.

Personalize the entire experience. The Internet allows your company to treat people like individuals. Because of all the high possibilities, the marketplace also has high expectations, performance-wise from you. Do not fail them.

This executive action briefing is my first written communication on mastering the opportunities on the Internet. Hopefully, it will serve as a good grounding primer for you to build meaningful success and prosperity.