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Using the Internet for Direct Marketing

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Instant information – that's what the Internet provides. The Internet is popular and easy to use. It is not personal, however, and direct marketing businesses thrive on personal contact. Why, then, should you consider using the Internet to promote your direct marketing business? The Internet's potential as a tool for direct marketing comes from its ability to enhance, not replace, the connection between your business and your customers. A website is one of the most popular ways to use the Internet to promote a business. It provides a means to reach those potential customers who do not know about you and who might not venture a visit without having more information. It is also a way to provide some basic information about your business that you might otherwise spend considerable time and energy making available. For example, a business website can provide customers with answers to general questions such as hours of operation, directions to the business, products and availability. This information is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, without customers having to call you.

Suppose you want to have a website for your direct marketing business. How do you go about establishing one? This publication presents information about how to build Web pages to enhance your direct marketing business's performance. It addresses issues about what to put on your website, how to design and construct the website, launching and promoting the site, and evaluating its effectiveness. It also discusses alternatives to having a business website. The publication ends with a list of questions to consider as you plan your site, and a brief glossary of terms.

Planning Your Message

In deciding how you will use the Internet for direct marketing, keep in mind that your website provides you with a means to market your business, not just your products. The message you deliver on your website communicates the nature of your business and much more, but this message is communicated by more than just the text you use. For example, if you have an agritourism operation that is fun for the whole family, the website should reflect this by being user-friendly, fun, and informative. A well-designed site will give people a positive image of your business, as well as provide information they need, but the converse is also true – a poorly designed site, for example, one that is difficult to use or cluttered, can also give people a negative image of your business by giving them the impression that your business is likewise disorganized or poorly managed.

Identify your Goals and Target Market

If you want to design a website for your business, the first task is to identify your goals and target market for the site. Decide what message you want to communicate to your customers, and identify the clientele you hope to reach through the site. Be sure everything you put on your website reflects your business and the reasons people would want to frequent your business. You can do this by making a list of the features of your product and business that you think are of interest and importance to your target clientele. For example, if you sell pasture-fed beef, do your customers come to you because it is the best tasting beef they have ever eaten? Because they want to support a local business? Because they have learned about the health benefits of pasture-

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fed beef? Identify the key factors motivating your customers, and highlight how your business and product features these throughout your site.

Run a "reality check," considering whether your target clientele are appropriate customers to reach through the Internet. The average direct market customer is older, with above average income and education. Many Internet users share these same characteristics; in fact, about 41 percent of Internet users have a college education or higher, have an average household income of $50,000, and are at least 35 years old (iNetShops). Thus, if you cater to the typical direct market customers, the Internet can be a good way to reach them, but if you cater to a clientele that does not match this profile, then look for evidence that they do, in fact, use the Internet. If not, your job of marketing to them through the Internet will be much harder.

Types of Websites: Information or Sales

A business website can serve informational or sales purposes. An informational website focuses on providing information about your business and products: who, what, where, when, how, and why – the typical news story questions. An informational website can consist of one page or multiple linked pages. A one-page website should be brief, including basic information such as identification of the business, information on products and services, location, hours of operation, and contact information. Such a site should be designed with simplicity and clarity in mind. It can be made attractive with a few pictures that communicate what the business is about.

If you plan to include a lot of information or information on diverse topics, use multiple Web pages. A website with multiple pages generally has a single page, either a "splash page" or a "home page" – that is the entry point for all users. This page then provides links to other pages that have more detailed information. Using multiple Web pages gives you the flexibility of being able to "sell your business." Selling your business includes telling about the people, the production practices, and the history behind your business. The flexibility of multiple pages also allows for coupons and surveys, announcing special events, providing driving directions and maps, a picture gallery, and much more. For example, the Sterrett Gardens site (Figure 1) shows the link to "Galleries," which gives the viewer pictures of the daylily cultivars they sell. The Larriland Farm site (Figure 2) provides an example of a link to sign up for mailings, which include specials and coupons.

Figure 1. Link to Galleries, Sterrett Gardens

Figure 2. Link to sign up for Specials e-newsletter, Larriland Farm

If your goal is to sell products using the Internet, you face numerous additional issues such as collecting moneys, charging taxes, covering shipping and handling, insurances, replacement of lost or damaged orders, cancelled orders, etc. If you plan to sell on the Internet, consider:

- Selling over the Internet presents both cost and benefit trade-offs for you and your customers. Benefits for you include a larger volume of sales than you might otherwise have if you only sell face-to-face, ease in selling to customers who are far away, and even logistical conveniences. For customers, benefits include easy access to a product that they want without the hassle of driving to purchase it or other inconveniences.
- Selling over the Internet, as opposed to on-site only, will also involve some additional costs that either you or your customers will have to bear. Examples include shipping and handling, packaging, and insurance. Some businesses charge these costs to their customers; others cover them to motivate Internet sales. Consider the cost and benefit trade-offs and how they weigh out from both your perspective and your customers' before you decide to sell over the Internet.

- The costs of setting up a site to take orders and accept credit cards over the Internet can be significant. The site must be secure and customer information must be kept confidential. Credit card companies charge a fee based on volume of sales if you accept their cards. Some credit card companies may offer special rates to small businesses through their merchant accounts. Other companies, such as Paypal, exist to handle such transactions for you. The company you choose must be reputable, secure, and convenient for both you and your customers to use. Monster Small Business provides a brief discussion of additional issues to consider in deciding whether to accept credit cards online (*www.monstersmallbusiness.com/ecommerce-strategy/merchant-accept-credit-cards.asp*).

- In addition to handling credit card transactions, you or your merchant will also need to be able to handle sales tax for those states that require it. If your merchant provides this service, it may involve an additional fee.

- Not all products are appropriate for Internet sales. Some products, such as fresh produce, baked goods, and meats generally are too perishable and/or fragile to withstand shipping unless you are willing to invest in specialized shipping containers and express delivery. Value-added products like wreaths, salsas, and gift baskets that are more relatively durable and have a high value for their weight or volume can be particularly well suited to Internet sales.

- Other factors to consider include:

  — An increase in sales caused by selling over the Internet means that you will also need to be able to increase your production, which may require investments in additional production facilities.

  — People who buy over the Internet because of the convenience expect good service and quick responses. You must schedule enough labor to take care of sales orders and questions, as well as keep your website updated with current prices, etc.

  — If you will sell products over the Internet, you need to have accurate product descriptions. Take into account the cost and availability of good pictures and other descriptors to show the products you have for sale and to promote your operation.

Designing Your Website

Site Structure and Content

Once you know what you'd like to achieve and whom you'd like to reach with your site, your next consideration is what the site will actually contain and how it will be formatted. Start with a home page, which is the first thing that visitors to your website will see. Make it attractive. Typically, the home page would include the name of your business, your logo, and a brief description of what you do (Figure 3). You will also use the home page to provide links to other pages (Figure 1). Links are generally kept to the top or edges of Web pages – if you put the links at the bottom of the page, viewers have to scroll all the way down the page to get to them unless you put the links in a frame that keeps them always on the screen at the bottom. If you plan to have a single-page site, then you will also want to include succinct information about product offerings, contact information, hours of operation, your location, and directions. If the site has multiple pages, this information can be linked to the home page. Be sure that you provide a phone number, not just an e-mail address, in your contact information.

Other contents that can enhance a site, but are not necessary, include:

- A history of your business, particularly if you think it is a draw for customers. For example, if your business has been in the family for 200 years and your customers want to support family farms, highlight it.

Figure 3. Home page, Wade's Mill

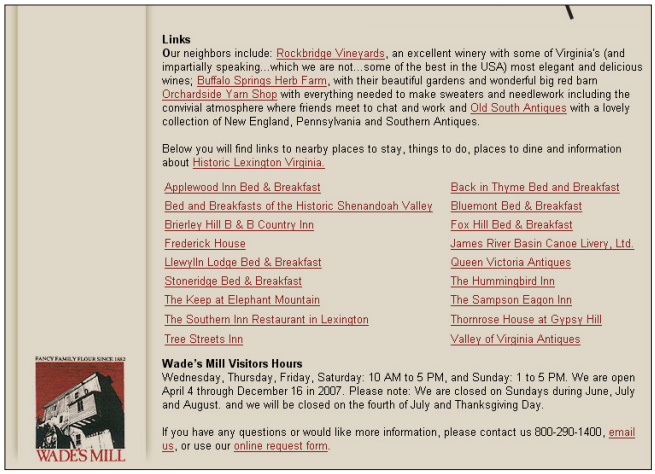

Figure 4. Links to external sites, Wade's Mill

- Information about the product or production practices you use. This would be of particular interest to customers who are interested in your product because of health or altruistic motivations, such as its use of practices that promote animal welfare or environmental sustainability. Again, the idea is to identify what motivates your customers and make it clear that you offer it.
- Links to external sites (Figure 4). Linking to external sites with information that complements your business provides viewers with additional information at no cost to you, since you do not have to pay to develop such sites. Hence, such links can be a cost effective enhancement to your own site. Be careful in choosing what sites to link to, however, as they reflect on your business. Before you choose to link to a site, consider whether you are willing to stand behind the information and views it presents. If not, but you feel it is still useful, provide a disclaimer on your own site where you link to it. Be sure, too, to check regularly that the sites you provide links to are active. Update or eliminate links and references to sites if they are not active.
- A site map (Figure 5) makes it easy for viewers to see exactly what is included on your site. It is particularly useful if your site is comprised of interlinked pages, for example, if a customer has to click on two or more links to find the information he or she is seeking, then it is appropriate to provide a site map to facilitate navigation. While some people may enjoy browsing your page out of curiosity or a general interest in your business, those who are relying on it for information will value being able to find what they are looking for quickly and easily.

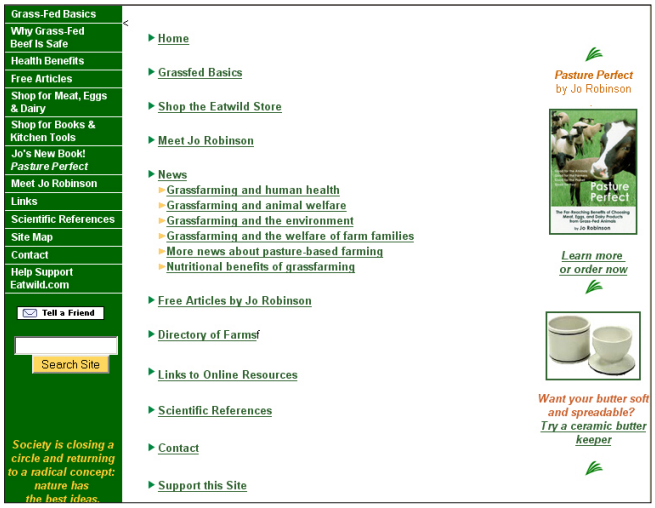

Figure 5. Site map, Eat Wild

- Specials, coupons, and seasonal items of interest, including events and promotions.
- If ethnic or international consumers are part of your target clientele, consider having a version of your site translated to whatever language they use (Spanish is often a good option). Be sure to select a competent translator and have someone else read the translation to be sure it says what you want it to say. Beware of software translators! Though they have gotten better over recent years, they are often not reliable and can present a very unprofessional image.

Details on Content

As you plan your site, visit many websites. Make notes of what you like and what you don't like. Bookmark the websites you visit so that you can go back and review them when you are ready to start developing your own. Format is a personal decision. Keep in mind how easy the viewer will find it to navigate around the website. Finally, decide what you want on each Web page. Sketch out each page showing where you want text, pictures, and links, as well as a map of the relationships and linkages that will exist among the pages. The following bullets give pointers on specific content and formatting considerations:

- **Font sizes:** Use font sizes that are big enough and clear enough for people to read; if in doubt, use a slightly larger font.
- **Typefaces:** Use typefaces that are commonly available, such as Arial, Tahoma, Courier, or Times New Roman. Use a consistent typeface rather than mixing them, which tends to be unattractive.

- **Formatting:** Keep a consistent format from one page to another – otherwise your viewers will be confused or even wonder if they are still on your website.
- **Color schemes:** Color schemes on websites can enhance your product or turn off your customer. Check out other websites and decide what works well. Frequently, the use of muted or gray-tone colors that compliment your products are better than bright colors that compete for attention. Your color scheme can be unique but must be acceptable to others – keep in mind that what shows up as gold on your computer may show up as a sickly yellow on someone else's. Remember that approximately 10 percent of American men are colorblind, and choose color combinations that they can distinguish.
- **Pictures and graphics:** If you use graphics, choose them carefully, keeping in mind how quickly they load and whether they tell the story you want. Clear, high-quality, appropriate pictures enhance the appearance of a website. However, the file size of the picture will affect how quickly or slowly the website will load – avoid using large files if smaller ones can be used instead. Most Web pictures need to have a resolution of only 72 to 100 dots per inch (dpi). This resolution makes the file size relatively small while having a high-quality appearance when viewed on the web and can come across as unprofessional.
- **Animation:** As you plan your website, remember that the more bells and whistles, i.e., animation, that you add, the more maintenance it will require and the more time it will take to load. Animation also distracts people when they view your website and can come across as unprofessional.
- **Links:** Your website isn't complete until all the graphics come up, all the links work, and no "dead ends" show up.
- **Pages in process:** Avoid pages that are "Under Construction" or "Coming Soon" by only launching the site or adding links when they are complete.

Naming Your Website

A domain name identifies the IP (Internet protocol) address (a unique series of numbers that routes the user to a specific website). Select a domain name that's easy to remember and spell and contains no numbers, hyphens, or symbols. The name should say something about your business. In the examples used, the domain names are the names of the businesses. Although .biz is becoming more popular, stick with .com following your domain name. Nothing before the .com is case sensitive; but everything after .com is. To allow people to get to your home page easily, don't add anything after .com; save the additions for subsequent pages.

One very important issue to consider is who will own your domain name. According to Web law *www.keytlaw.com/urls/urllaw.htm*), the person whose name is on the registration owns the name. If you have a website designer get the name for you, be sure that your name is on the purchase agreement. Be sure you have the identification and password to the name so that you can control it. Control is important if you change Web designers, or Internet Service Provider (ISP) or host. Do NOT let the ISP get the name for you. If you look for bargains like free domain names, you can find them, but you run the risk of having someone else purchase the name so that you cannot use it. ISPs do not necessarily purchase the domain names they obtain for their customers. Furthermore, if they own it, they control it.

Building Your Website

Unless you are a Web designer or you know one who can do the work for you, hire a professional. Remember that your website reflects your business, and it is worth the investment to be sure it looks professional and works well. Interview several Web designers before hiring one. Talk to them about your ideas for the site, and listen to their ideas – this interaction will help you get a sense of how appropriate the designers are for your needs. Be sure that you will be able to give feedback on the site as it is designed so that the website reflects your goals. Look for Web designers who have experience working with businesses similar to yours. Investigate cost and payment options, and ask to see other sites that they have designed. Put your agreement with them in writing. A simple design is less costly and allows for more flexibility than a complex one. Provide the text and any pictures you want included unless the designer requires that he/she use his/her own pictures.

Part of the agreement with the designer should include who owns the Web content and who will maintain the website and keep it updated. If the Web designer owns the content and you stop using him/her, you may lose the investment you have in the website. It takes time to keep a website updated, and nothing frustrates viewers quite as much as an out-of-date website or one with broken links. If you want the designer to be responsible for the updates, you will pay for that service. It might prove more cost efficient for you or someone in your family to learn how to make changes, provided that you have the time and can do it competently. The training can become part of your agreement with the designer.

If you are selling on the Internet, use the "three-click rule": click on product, click on sale, click to finish. Too many clicks to buy will often drive away potential customers. Make directions clear and concise.

Once the site has been developed, but before you actually make it available to the public, review the website yourself and invite friends, family members, and associates to help you "trouble shoot." Make very sure you check for "speling misteaks" or incorrectly used words such as "to" for "too" "hose" for "house." Spell check will not pick up on typos if the incorrectly spelled words actually exist. Ask someone who has never seen the site before to review it and look for mistakes – often it takes an outside eye to find mistakes that you have overlooked. For additional ideas of areas to check for, read Nielsen's "Top Ten Mistakes in Web Design" found at *www.useit.com/alertbox/9605.html*.

Launching and Promoting Your Website

Finding a Web Host

A Web host provides a platform from which your website is made available on the Internet. There are a number of factors that are important to consider in choosing a Web host. These include:

- **Speed:** Different hosts will support different speeds. Speed influences how quickly you or a customer can upload your site.
- **The host's history of "down time.**" During "down time" your website will not be available to other viewers. Most servers are "down" (inactive) for some period of time, so providers that tell you they are "up" (active) 95 percent to 98 percent of the time are acceptable, and a provider that says its sites are up 100 percent of the time should be questioned.
- **Cost:** Some hosts are "free;" but "free" means they put their banner at the top and run advertisements on the subscribers' Web pages, giving them an unprofessional image.
- **Bandwidth:** Bandwidth determines the "carrying capacity" of the host, which influences how many people can look at your website at the same time.
- **Space:** You will likely have to pay different rates depending on how much "space" your website occupies. Space refers to the file size of your site, which is a function of its complexity and content.
- **Security:** Make sure your host has adequate security provisions so that people will not be able to "hack" into the site and disrupt it, steal information, or change content.

Advertising Your Website

Your Web designer should include meta tags in the information for your Web pages. Meta tags list key words that occur throughout your website. These key words are what the Web search engines use to find your website. A meta tag for Larriland Farms, for example, might read "farm,maryland,pick,your,own,fruit,vegetables,family,kids,entertainment,activities,strawberries,peaches,apples,cherries,larriland,farms,christmas,harvest,md,organic,food,natural." (Notice there are no spaces, only commas, between the words.) Any person who searches on any one of those terms should thus have the Larriland Farms site show up in their search results. The meta tag content of the Web page also aids the search engine in finding your website. Your Web designer will know how to include meta tags; your job is to make sure they are appropriate. For a fee, you can also list your site with search engines like Yahoo. These listings will help your site to come up sooner when one of your meta tags is typed in. Prices range from a flat fee to a small fee plus a charge per click on the site.

One of the best and least expensive ways to publicize your website is to include it in all your advertising and promotional materials. Your Web address can appear on business cards, business letterhead, newsletters, road signs, t-shirts, customer receipts, and anything else that carries your business name!

Evaluating the Cost-Effectiveness of Your Website

Before spending a lot of time and money on a website, consider how you will know if it is paying off as an investment. There are two elements to think about: The first is how many people actually visit your site. The second is how many of the people who visit your site are motivated to visit and spend money at your business. There are several ways you can monitor how many people actually visit the site. Many websites include counters that record the number of times the page is visited. This provides only a rough gauge of its effectiveness due to the way that these counters calculate "hits." In brief, they tend to focus on the quantity rather than the "quality" of a visit – for example, if someone visits your site and closes it without actually reading anything then it will still count as a hit. (For a more

detailed explanation of ways that Web visitors' behavior is analyzed, see "Web Analytics" at *en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_analytics*.)

A number of methods are available to estimate how effective the site is in actually generating visits and sales. One popular method is to issue coupons that are only available on the website, and monitor how many of them are actually redeemed. Coupons can be changed to reflect seasonal offerings, and can even be used to help move high volume products! Another alternative is to provide people with a means to sign up for Internet newsletters on the website, or weekly specials that you e-mail them, again providing an indication of how many people have a deeper interest in the business, and consequently a higher likelihood of visiting it.

A more direct way to gauge the effectiveness of your website is through a survey. You can survey your customers to find out how many have used your site, or you can survey people who use your site to find out how many end up as customers. If you launch a survey through your website, you can offer an incentive to participate by having a drawing with a reward. You can later advertise the winner or winners, another good marketing tool. Be careful with how you use Internet lotteries though – you may end up with someone from Guam completing it and you can be pretty sure he/she will never visit your farm. Carefully specify any restrictions on the reward so that you get responses from people who truly are potential customers. To do this, you can specify for example that the winner must live within a certain area, or come to the business to collect the prize. Wade's Mill owners measure the effectiveness of their website based on how many new people they have signing up for their newsletters and other information. If they don't reach their target for the specified time frame, they work on reevaluating and revising parts of their website.

Alternatives to Websites

If you decide not to use a website, alternative ways to use the Internet to promote your direct marketing business include e-mail and electronic newsletters or fact sheets. Using e-mail to help contact customers or distribute electronic newsletters can help save on printing and postage costs. Your biggest challenge with e-mail, like "snail mail," will be building and maintaining an e-mail address list. Further, e-mail lists are more likely to serve current customers rather than attract new ones because it will be more difficult for them to become aware of your business than it would if you have your own site. If you do develop such an e-mail list, make sure to provide your customers with a way to "opt out" of receiving future e-mails if they prefer not to. Be sure to establish a clear privacy policy and always abide by it. Many people prefer that you never ever share their e-mail addresses with anyone, and you will certainly have many irate customers if you ever sell it!

E-mail is also a two-way street – if you send e-mail you should expect to receive e-mail too, and you will need to respond to it. This can be very time consuming. One option is to have prepared fact sheets or "FAQs" (answers to Frequently Asked Questions) that you can distribute in response to customers' most common information requests.

Conclusion

For direct marketers, websites can be an effective way to expand their customer base. While you can develop your own website, you will likely have better results and save yourself a lot of headaches if you hire a Web designer to do it for you. Before you "take the plunge" be sure to identify the specific benefits that you hope to achieve with your site and compare them to the costs you anticipate. Once you have your site established, do periodic updates of your costs and benefits to see how the site is actually performing.

Questions to Ask When Developing a Website

What are your goals for your website?

Can you handle the increase in sales that will result from using the Web?

Do you need multiple Web pages? If yes, develop the relationships among the pages.

Can your product be sold on the Web?

What's the best way for you to handle sales transactions on the Web?

What method of shipping should you use?

What colors will show up best on most computers?

What typefaces and fonts will be easiest to read?

Write down the who, what, when, where, why, and how of your operation.

What is the domain name for your website? Is it easy to remember and spell? Does it mean something?

Whose name will your domain be registered in, who will register it, and who will have the password?

Will you design your own website or hire someone?

Does your Web designer understand what you want?

How much will he/she charge?

Do payments fit your budget and cash flow?

Who will maintain and update the Web pages?

How often will they need updating?

Who's responsible for text and pictures?

Do all those involved agree with the finished product?

Who will host your website?

How will you evaluate the effectiveness of your website?

Glossary

Home page: the top-level entry-point Web page relating to an individual, institution, or possibly a subject area. It often has a URL consisting of just a hostname, e.g. *www.sterrettgardens.com*. All other pages on a website are usually accessible by following links from the home page.

URL: the address of a Web page on the World Wide Web (synonym: uniform resource locator, universal resource locator).

Typeface: style of the type; how it looks, examples are Times New Roman, Comic Sans MS, Tahoma, Arial.

Domain name: name that identifies the URL. The domain name is the name of the website; it differs from the "IP address," which is a series of numbers that are associated with the domain name.

Meta tags: words used to describe the data on a Web page and referenced by search engines to identify relevant websites based on the user's search terms.

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