

No purchase necessary

How does an organisation that does not sell goods or services online attract visitors to its site and keep them coming back?

In early 2001, ebusiness consultancy Rubus commissioned a survey from research company ICM. The findings raised a few eyebrows: only 52% of the Times Top 1000 companies have web sites that allow for online transactions, be they business-to-business (B2B) or business-to-consumer (B2C).

The survey misses an important point, though. While many of these companies are moving more of their B2B trading with suppliers and distributors online, many make or sell products that do not lend themselves to B2C web commerce. These companies include food and drink manufacturers, for example, where, typically, distribution is handled by a third party.

For such organisations, corporate web

discussions about site features, functions and content – such as an online quiz or chat room – that are far removed from their traditional territory.

According to Ethan Segal, digital marketing group director at web site design company Agency.com, organisations like cosmetics company Ponds Institute, and food and drink manufacturers such as Pepsi and Heineken, use their web sites to enhance relationships with customers. “They’re all non-product-focused communications, aimed directly at impacting sales,” he says. Through their web sites, such organisations can provide “contextually relevant experience to the brand that adds functional, personal and financial benefits to the customer”.

simple ‘brochures on the web’. Michelle Booth, business development director at web design agency Deepend Design, says that as companies link their forward-facing web sites to CRM systems, they are able to exploit more meaningfully their full value in developing customer relationships.

But to take full advantage of integrated systems, the CIO must be involved, argues Booth. “It used to be the case that I would initially only see the head of the marketing department when discussing what the site would be like. But they didn’t understand the technical side of things and would ask for things that couldn’t work, or the system wouldn’t be integrated with the rest of the IT infrastructure. Now I tend to meet both the head of marketing and the head of IT.”

With the CIO involved, it is possible for marketing departments to expand their aspirations beyond a pure branding web site. Some fundamental ‘due diligence’ is required for any organisation embarking on a major ebusiness project, says Neal Muranyi, a director of IT consultancy The Database Group. “A basic piece of work involves using third-party data to analyse which of your valuable customers are already online and how many say they will be in the next year or two. Any CIO worth their salt should check that the marketing department has done this – if they haven’t, then having a sophisticated online presence at all may be a complete waste of time.”

Customers, continues Muranyi, can be split into two categories. “There are those who are likely to remain loyal, purchasing offline at the same level forever, and those who may be modest-value customers, but who have major potential to take other products that they currently don’t – maybe even products that aren’t sold yet.”

“What is needed is a contextually relevant experience that benefits the user.”

sites have not moved beyond the role of a marketing bulletin board – and, arguably, they do not need to. In fact, the sites themselves are often driven by marketing departments, to the extent that the CIO plays a peripheral, infrastructure support role in their development.

But consumer-focused organisations that cannot sell their products online still require sophisticated and well-visited web sites. When these web sites can cost in excess of £1 million to build and hundreds of thousands to run, they need to be exploited as powerful marketing and branding tools. In the absence of online sales, these businesses must create compelling features that draw consumer traffic to the site. And CIOs are being drawn into corporate-wide

OPEN AND ACCOUNTABLE

Petroleum company Shell, recalls Neil Gibb, director of content strategy at ebusiness consultancy Sapient, wanted to use its web site so it could be seen to be more open and accountable to its shareholders. “A key content element of its Shell.com site is a facility for discussion groups, where Shell posts its views on issues, invites responses from allies and critics alike, and then uses these opinions to help refine and adjust company policies.” According to Shell, these forums “provide an area in which people are free to comment on any aspects of Shell’s policies, practices and principles”.

It is interactive functions such as these that stop marketing web sites from being

INTERESTING AND STICKY

By appealing to these customers with an interesting and 'sticky' site (one they stay on for long periods of time), the web site can replace some of the direct marketing budget. But how do companies make customers come to – and stay at – a web site where they can't buy anything?

Guinness, of course, gained considerable word-of-mouth attention by producing a screensaver of one of its adverts that could be downloaded from Guinness.com. (They are also offering online the punch lines to jokes started in offline adverts.)

According to Booth of Deepend Design, even the best web site will need an offline marketing campaign to attract visitors, while Fraser Hay, CEO of Strategic Marketing Ventures, suggests that original viral marketing can also be beneficial. Hay, in fact, has set up a site called hitsnclicks.com to advise small businesses on how to attract people to their sites.

"You can never have too many reciprocal links," he argues. "You can set up hundreds if you put the time into it and they will drive traffic to sites over and over again." Businesses can also encourage traffic through affiliate programmes and by submitting their web site details to as many search engines as possible.

Sapient's Gibb worked with Homebase on building a sticky web site for the DIY supplier. "Homebase appreciated that it would be competing online with TV interior design programmes, with consumer shows like Ideal Home, and with many home design and lifestyle publications. As a result of user research, Homebase established that men want to be informed and educated about DIY – and they can do this online without embarrassment. So the Homebase web site features DIY guides and practical advice that provide this education – and which also build the value of the Homebase brand by making it more relevant to customers."

Gibb has encountered some interesting attempts by companies to produce sticky web sites: "Kodak.com has a 'light calculator' area, where users can get accurate information about daylight clarity and duration for any part of the world. And BT.com has a free phonebook service, where you can find out a person's number and then send a message to them through the site. These 'added value' elements can be a useful bargaining tool between what customers want and what you want to tell them."

Ebrochure.com

PIONEERS Pantene shampoo, Heineken beer, Smirnoff vodka and Walkers crisps. These are all well-known products, but their manufacturers do not want to sell them online. How, then, are these companies luring customers to their web sites?

Brand: Pantene hair products
Company: Procter & Gamble
Web site: www.pantene.com
Web site features: 'Hair type' calculator · Beauty tips

Brand: Heineken beer
Company: Heineken Holding NV
Web site: www.heineken.com

Web site features: 'Heineken Lounge' chat-room · Screensavers · Ecards · Sports news

Brand: Smirnoff vodka
Company: The Pierre Smirnoff Company
Web site: www.smirnoff.com
Web site features: Cocktail generator · Ecards · Competitions to win Smirnoff-branded goods

Brand: Walkers crisps
Company: Walkers Snack Foods Limited
Web site: www.walkers.co.uk
Web site features: Online gallery for teachers to post pupils' work · 'Free books for schools' campaign · Football news

Muranyi believes these 'quasi-portals' work best when there is at least some connection between the promotions or functions and the products. "The whole point of the exercise is to make the web site act as a powerful advertising medium by making it genuinely useful to the valued customer. If there is no connection, even just by theme, to the product range, then it becomes commercially redundant."

Even if the marketing budget will not stretch to purchasing news-feeds or portal content, it is possible to take advantage of sites that can offer those facilities, says Tom Reid, director of brand and communications at market research company Morpace International. "Set up your own community of like web sites – such as The Food and Drink portal which has everything from recipes to wine growers – as well as your site and partner sites."

Paul Edmunds, technical marketing manager at IT services provider Calleo, says that an area ripe for development is customer feedback into product development. "In my experience, customers appreciate this kind of personalised service."

Hay of Strategic Marketing Ventures also advocates the use of surveys and polls relevant to visitor interests, the results of which are published on the site. Giving visitors something free, such as a newsletter, can also work. Companies can even give customers the opportunity to control various parts of a transaction through an online process, Gibb of Sapient suggests, even if it is not one they could have started online. FedEx.com, for instance, allows customers to track packages in real time.

And that is when a web site really needs support from the IT department.

The CIO has to commit resources, not just to set up the site, but also to maintain it. "Too often, content is left for too long, making sites look tired and out of touch," says Gibb. "This means ensuring that the support and resources to execute site updates and content refreshes are in place. A web site is a dynamic process, rather like publishing. It demands long-term commitment and investment. It may be surprising, but there's a marked drop-off in web site quality after about three months of life because little attention is paid to site, design and content upgrades."

"There is one final form of payback from the site," adds Muranyi. "The marketing department pays out masses for good, deep data on customers. Some of the most successful sites of this type ask for one or two extra pieces of customer information in return for a promotional discount, or for access to different areas of the site. They also tend to sweeten this process by offering loyalty points. The result is a site that delivers deep information on the most valuable customers, allowing the site owner to confirm or question the promos and functions on the site and refine it."

Clearly, this is insight that few companies can afford to ignore. ☺

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