

HOW TO CREATE A SUCCESSFUL COMMERCIAL WEBSITE

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CONTENTS

1. Introduction	9
Who is the book aimed at? 9, Essential Building Blocks 10, A New Era 11, A Few Basic Lessons 11	
2. Initial Considerations	17
Hosted Solutions 17, Researching the Competition 18, Find Unique Selling Points 19, The Importance of Links 20, The Importance of Copy 20, Look and Feel 21, What does a Search-Engine actually do? 22, Keywords and Copy 23, Search-Engine Methods are Constantly Changing 24, Search- Engine Optimisation 24, The Rise of the Contextual Advertising 26	
3. Essential Elements of a Website	29
Home Page 29, Who You Are 30, Clear and Easy to Use 30, Easily Downloaded Information 31, Customer Focus 32, FAQ's 32, Building a Web Presence 33, Choose a good ISP 33, The Importance of Your Website Name 35, ISP Capacity and Facilities 36	

CONTENTS

4. Staffing your Website	41
Webmaster 41, Website Designer 42, Who Owns Your Website? 43, Processing Your Orders 44, Customer Liaison 45	
5. Shopping Trolleys and E-Commerce	47
Partially-Hosted Solutions 48, E-Commerce Banking Process 49, Delivery and Refunds 52, Other Payment Methods 52, Internet Merchant Accounts 53, Shopping Trolley Software 54, Complete Order Processing Software 55, Order Processing from an Application Service Provider 56, A Simple Partially-Hosted Shopping Trolley 57, The Magic Buy Button 58, Interfacing with Your Merchant Account 60, Advantages of Hosted Shopping Trolleys 60, Disadvantages of Hosted Shopping Trolleys 62	
6. Security and “Scams”	65
We Are All Targets Now 65, Hackers – Black or White 66, Internet Regulation 67, The Dreaded Spam E-mail 67, Spam and Scam 69, The Scams Are Getting Bigger 70, Don’t Bug Me 71, Hijacking Your Phone Line 71, Blocking Cookies 72, Counter Measures 73, The Importance of Controlling Spam 74, Website Security 75, It’s Complicated! 78	

CONTENTS

7. Search-Engine Submission and Optimisation.....	81
DIY Optimisation 81, Links Show Popularity – Don't They? 82, Guessing the Search-Engine's Methods 83, We don't like Ads! 83, Search-Engine's Rule OK 84, What Might Get Your Site Banned? 85, Content is King 86, No More automated Submissions? 87, We Submit Your Site to 1000's of Search-Engines 88, Web Crawlers, Spiders, Robots 90, What Most Affects Your Page Ranking? 91, Essential HTML Code and W3C 93, Enhanced Coding 94, Regular Changes = Additional Indexing 96	
8. Marketing.....	99
Raising Your Page-Ranking 99, Make Some Friends 100, Advertorials and Product Placement 101, Be Perceived as an Expert 102, Organic Growth and Web 'Real Estate' 104, More 'Real Estate' 106, Pay Per Click 107, Banner Exchanges 108, Once Your Web Traffic Increases 108, The Blogger 109, In Conclusion 111	
Glossary.....	113
Index.....	123

1.

INTRODUCTION

Who is the book aimed at?

First things first – this book is targeted towards those who are involved with small to medium-sized businesses that require a web presence in order to boost their business. It is, therefore, a primer, intended to give a detailed overview of the processes necessary to achieve a successful commercial website. I bring my experience to bear from the view of essential commercial decisions required to put your business firmly into the hub of the web. It is not intended for those businesses involving downloads of software, mp3 (music), videos, etc. as these sites have specific requirements such as hefty servers and “feeds” which require specialised equipment. Also businesses reliant on large database integration will again invariably need costly programmed elements and these are beyond the scope of this book – although the principles of website structure and marketing will still apply.

Throughout the book I attempt to give the reader a realistic picture of the basic processes involved and warn of the traps into which the unsuspecting can fall. I pull no punches and warn the reader now that a successful website *will* incur a considerable on-cost (especially during set-up), on-going

maintenance, and regular updates (which provide a dynamic, successful website) must be taken into account. If a business already has experienced IT, sales or marketing personnel, then their skills can be used to alleviate some of the costs. These basic costs will draw on business funds long before you generate the feedback sales, depending, of course, on the effectiveness of your product(s) and marketing. However, it is realistic to look at a number of years, rather than months, to gain a level of traffic through your site giving you some profit. The Internet *is* a powerful sales medium and is increasingly important to many businesses – although we in Britain have not embraced web shopping as keenly as the USA, it *is* becoming a stable and trusted medium. Who can afford to ignore the income potential of on-line purchasing?

Essential Building Blocks

The book gives the reader an overview of critical website requirements and options depending on the scope or size of the business. It also attempts to provide a guide to the essential building blocks of how a web site should be constructed (without being too technical) in order to be “search-engine friendly” and integrated into good web promotion. Search engines – like Google or Yahoo – are the indexing systems that allow us to search for web sites – it is vitally important to be friendly to them! Google is located on the web at <http://www.google.co.uk> and Yahoo is at <http://uk.yahoo.com>.

The book gives the reader a number of hints and tips – ways to promote your site, cutting down on unnecessary costs, how to

avoid web “optimisers” who are promising you “amazing” results whilst taking hefty fees for doing very little, and refers to sites that provide useful tools or freebies.

Let’s just get a background to the web as it appears today. Since it’s inception the internet has gone through a number of incarnations – US Strategic Defence, University Research and Education, Community and Focus Groups, World-Wide Web, Information Highway incorporating multimedia, Commercial showcase/Internet shopping, and with broadband now entrenched, multi-whatever you like!

A New Era

We are entering a new era where all our traditional media is being challenged as never before – we can download music to personal “ipods” and carry around whole jukeboxes of music in a hand-held device. We can hook into digital broadband radio stations from across the world due to clever – nay, very clever - means of compressed digitised sound. We can hook into television broadcasts - admittedly most are recorded in a form of digitised video, but don’t blink - TV *will be* incorporated into web distribution soon on a world-wide scale. We have been conferencing for years, *now* we can videoconference internationally, we can web-phone around the world at local phone charges, we can watch TV on our mobile phones, and this media-integration is going to increase dramatically over the next few years.

A Few Basic Lessons

The web has certainly come a long way since I was teaching computing – I started teaching programming with punched cards (each card equated to a single character!) – equivalent to caveman paintings compared with the web now! So this is our first lesson really – you are dealing with a *dynamic environment* – it changes almost daily – do not take anything for granted – if this book hasn't been revised in two or so years throw it away! Yes that's how quickly things change on the web – luckily some things do remain more constant than others – and that's what this book is about. Incidentally, I do intend to provide regular revisions to this book! I will not bother you with anything that does not have substance, and will not give you misguided “tricks”(many of these “tricks” are out-dated anyway and may actively compromise your website). I will, instead, focus on you and your business with a long-term approach to creating a web site you will be proud of.

Talking about “tricks” this brings me to the second lesson of web lore – They *are* all out to get you! *And* they're good at it! As you surf around the web you will be trapped – like a fly in a spider's web – and find yourself being seduced into all sorts of activities – saving sites as favourites, signing up to newsletters, applying for freebees, etc., etc. Spend some time doing this as an exploratory “game” whilst surfing sites that appeal to you and note *HOW you get trapped*, succumb to signing-up, etc. Look at the way *you* go for freebees, get seduced by “copy”, this is what your site needs – but more of that later. The important thing here is to recognise the difference between

legitimate web activity and illegitimate – the web is undergoing a transformation which is being led by search engines – in particular Google (www.Google.com) - which is gradually pushing out all the disreputable sites, spammers (if you have never had spam emails then you haven't surfed), fraudsters and unsavoury content providers generally.

Lesson number three has got to be – SECURITY – Although the web is probably the last bastion of free speech, and to that extent the global village of the web fraternity put up with *everything* on the web – all those who are earnest, honest, and forthright *plus* the religious fantasists, loony left activists, right-wing fascists, charlatans, hackers, spammers and pornographers – you choose your searches carefully! The web has traditionally been self-policing – and to that extent it used to get rid of spammers et al by “flaming” (everyone would send thousands of emails to the “spammer” and swamp his system, hey ho - the good ole days – there's too many of 'em now!!! In fact, the web is in danger of becoming swamped by spam emails).

In recent years we have a multiplicity of software protection to shield us from some of these – but make no mistake, the web harbours them all, and anti-virus protection along with firewall protection is a MUST; spyware protection is rapidly becoming a necessity – yes they can invade your computer just by linking to their website – but then business has always had its elements of fraudulent activity and the web lends itself so well to this – you cannot be too careful.

A Few Wise Words

Every silver lining has a cloud! And that brings me neatly to my next point – yes the web is a dynamic environment – yes programmers can do all sorts of wizzy things on the screen but NO you cannot sell that which cannot be sold. You may think that your product(s) is/are the best thing since sliced bread, but if it doesn't sell in a normal retail environment – then why should it sell on the web? This may sound like an obvious statement but you'd be surprised at the number of people who believe that they can start a web business, from scratch, and make a fortune. Remember the “dot-com” revolution! And these were intelligent stock market dealers who normally would check on the necessity of the last penny spent – they were “bamboozled” by the technological dynamism of web progress.

Then there's the moralistic standpoint such as when Sir Bob Geldof complained about the charitable Live8 tickets being sold at a premium by some dubious characters on ebay (the famous auction site <http://www.ebay.co.uk>). At first ebay said they could do nothing about it – but with adverse publicity in the media they quickly managed to do something once their reputation was at stake – *do not underestimate the web* – everyone is watching!! Do yourself a favour and keep your feet on the ground – if you can't sell it to your neighbours - you probably can't sell it on the web. Conversely, you can do some things on the web that you can't do on the high street – sometimes you need to think outside the box.

Of course there are exceptions to the rule and the web does attract young entrepreneurs such as those behind “lastminute.com”, Brent Hoberman and Martha Lane-Fox. One of the few “dot-com” successes providing last minute tickets or gifts and organising combinations of services such as travel arrangements *and* concerts *and* accommodation – note that the web has the edge over ordinary business where speed and efficiency between businesses is concerned. Note also that this service placed itself at the hub of many other successful web ventures and provided a unique selling point - it’s “go-getting” users *are prepared to pay a premium* for the service – this is why it survived!

There are of course also a plethora of smaller businesses that are selling on the web and doing very well at it – those that have achieved success have three things in common – they have planned their web site well, they have unique or competitive products and they have provided for the expense of marketing. Their web sites are therefore dynamic, continually changing and adapting to web-opportunities – their shop window is a changing feast, and surfers will, therefore, return again and again. The silver lining, therefore, does exist and if you are convinced that you have a good product, and have planned well then you *can* market it on the web *and*, possibly, make a fortune! The web is global. It *can* give you incredible coverage – go for it - the sky is the limit.

2.

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Hosted solutions

If your business is small or just starting out you may consider using a web-hosting solution to keep your initial costs down. There are an increasing number of web-hosting services on the web which will enable you to get a web presence quickly, without all the expense of designing and maintaining your own web site, but, unless you are just putting your toe in the internet shopping water, it is the author's opinion that these will not ultimately help your business. The major advantage here is that there are solutions that have virtually no start-up costs and payment can simply be a percentage of the transaction costs – hence you get your money and the provider gets their cut. There are some exceptions to the rule, such as ebay who allow anyone to easily set-up an account and then upload details of their products onto its website. The major advantage being that for very little cost users can share the advantages of the huge customer base and traffic that ebay gets; their goods for sale are therefore seen by many ebay customers – albeit that most of these are looking for bargains. Furthermore ebay has a range of options for traders who want to set up their own shops within the ebay 'brand', for example, their basic 'shop' package allows users to customise the look and feel of their shopfronts to some extent and provides

various ways to market their range of goods – all for a monthly subscription of £14.99. More sophisticated hosting solutions allow a greater range of controls over the look and feel of your website, *but*, beware of the complexities of the package on offer and read very carefully the small print – there are many who will be all too willing to take your money up-front and leave you struggling to achieve an end result.

Hosting sites that provide you with everything are equivalent to putting your goods in someone else's shop and the host (shop-owner) therefore tends to control your site's look and feel (some have a choice of "templates"), they often don't allow your own site name (or, if they do, may not allow you to take it with you if you decide to go your own way – your website name should be registered to you and not the ISP), and often involve the host placing their own advertising links, which take people away from your site. Control is the key – what happens when the host fluffs a transaction? Do you get the blame? How quickly can you change product information? What happens if the host company fails? Now, I'm not trying to be a killjoy, and many of these hosted solutions can provide a relatively cheap way of gaining a web presence, but the main thrust of any advertising that you will be doing is pointing to someone else's domain. They are in control: of the on-screen advertising, of your transactions, of your business! If they put their prices up by 200%, if they put your main rival's products next door, if the site runs slow, etc. what are you going to do? Start again? Having said all this I do recognise that some people will want to look at hosted solutions as a low-cost

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

starting point and I do give more information on these in chapter 5.

Researching the Competition

If you are, however, determined to create your own successful website (and I do recommend this approach) then preparation, research and planning are essential prerequisites. Also knowing what you want your site to look like and what you want to achieve is going to go a long way towards creating a site that is worthy of your business. So – your first task is to surf the web looking for sites that you like, but you must be objective and discerning about the task: keep a log of your preferred sites and list the advantages/disadvantages of each. Someone who is reasonably conversant with surfing the internet and understands the processes involved (your web designer would be good) should be present to point out some of the basic web functionality and to answer your questions. In the process you will want to look carefully at sites that are your direct competitors – you will probably realise fairly quickly which of these are the most successful (the first that you come upon on search engines usually) – try to use more than one search engine when doing your research e.g. Google and Yahoo (the top two most popular).

Find Unique Selling Points

During your research note what makes competitor sites attractive and popular – not that you want your site to look the same, you don't, *but* you do want to emulate the essential attractions. This analysing process should not be totally

objective (what attracts can be very subjective) and the best way to proceed is to meet with your directors or fellow workers to discuss the relative merits/demerits of each site and, if possible, find unique elements of your own business or products that the other sites don't have. I cannot stress too much what unique selling points will do to enhance your site above others – this is vitally important and we will come back to this point later.

The Importance of Links

Another major research area to look for are “outbound links” (links [adverts, banners, etc.] to other sites from each site you're analysing) – these are often to associated (or affiliated) businesses, or suppliers to the business, and if you follow these you will invariably find that there are links back (inbound links back to the original site). This mutual (or reciprocal) linking serves to enhance “web profile” i.e. the more sites you link to giving reciprocal links back give more routes for web surfers to find your site – this is increasingly important for a successful web site.

The Importance of Copy

The whole look and feel of your web site is vitally important – and a competent person should be chosen to write the required “copy”. By copy I mean the words used on your site to describe your products and to attract potential customers – and this is not as easy as some may think! You may decide to undertake this task in conjunction with your own

sales/marketing staff and the web designer in the initial specification stage – your sales staff understand the unique selling points of your products and the web designer will understand the ways in which web surfers click-through navigation links and this is crucial to creating a good web site. As you surf from site to site on the web you are instinctively guided to ways of gaining information, narrowing down searches, getting sidetracked and resorting to instinct for avoiding irrelevant adverts and links.

Look and Feel

All sites provide a look and feel according to their target audience – a site selling toys will probably give an air of excitement and entertainment with bright primary colours, whereas a site selling computer components will provide an air of being up-to-date with the latest gadgets and technical info, offer various deals and fast delivery, etc. The point being, the “copy” will be totally different according to the target audience. The copy should immediately show clients what to expect as they get deeper into the website – the first page or screen should portray quickly what the site is about and what it is selling – give information or deals or discounts on the most popular products – and give access to categories/subcategories of products for ease of access. The whole tone of your copy should guide the surfer to what they are looking for without insulting their intelligence or putting them off in any way. The copy must entice, explain, and direct people, but also allow

them to browse through the virtual shop easily – consider a “site map” if your site is large or in any way complicated.

“Language, spelling, and ability of the copywriter is vitally important!” Sorry about the above sentence but see what I mean – apart from appalling spelling did you spot that it should read “are vitally important”!! Poor spelling or grammar immediately deters the reader from continuing – mistakes or waffle reflect badly on the professionalism of your site and surfers will be quickly looking for the “Back” button. Your copy must be informative with good headings, subheadings, layout, images, easy to use links and navigation etc. The copy is also what search-engines use to index and categorise your site, which is why there’s plenty of discussion about “website optimisation”, “keywords”, “page ranking”, etc. on the web.

What does a Search-Engine actually do?

The search engine (e.g. Google is found at <http://www.google.com>) is a complicated beast *but* it is the most common way most people will arrive at a site and is therefore vitally important. It is an essential tool on the web and why there are so many of them. Essentially what they do is take the “copy” from your site’s web-page and sift through it ignoring the HTML(web-page language) and minor words (“and”, “but”, etc) and indexing what they consider to be key words and phrases along with your website description (usually from your web-page’s HTML Meta Description tag) and your URL (your site’s name). For instance, if your site sells lawnmowers and the words “lawn-mower” or “mower” are