

# Websites

## Online Gateways to Organizations

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**Learning Objectives.** This chapter examines how to:

- How to differentiate between different purposes and use of web sites
- Identify keys for website effectiveness
- Plan and manage a promotional website
- Optimize content so audiences can locate a site using a search engine
- Differentiate between 3 major types of websites used by organizations
- Gain insights about how to use major types of websites

## Overview

Websites are the basic platform for organizations to communicate with audiences who search them out online. Today, organizations of every size must maintain some type of web presence. To not be visible, or to be difficult to find on a major search engine such as Google or Yahoo, makes an organization suspect.

For many small retailers, using a listing or directory service such as Google Places for Business might be sufficient to provide basic information such as store location, telephone number and hours. However, most middle- and larger-size organizations opt to maintain their own sites in order to showcase their products and services – and, in many cases, enable users to conduct transactions online – order, request information, make reservations, etc.

When websites were first created in the mid-1990s, many organizations began with a single website that served as a gateway to the organization. As time progressed, however, larger organizations recognized the value of having multiple websites with separate web addresses that serve particular needs.

- **Main site or home page** is the term mostly commonly used to describe an organization's principal web gateway. Most main sites can be identified with the prefix <http://www> and is often followed by the organization's name or some variation thereof. (A website that does not include the www designation often indicates that it is a secondary site or resides on a secondary server.) Main sites typically serve multiple purposes and units within the organization. For example, sections might serve and be operated by marketing and sales, public relations, human resources or operations. Welcome pages on main sites usually feature links to multiple topics and need to be carefully organized with clear navigation.
- **Microsite** is the generic term used for specialized or secondary websites. Microsites have their own distinct web address and are typically devoted to a particular product, service, event, issue or topic. Microsites provide direct access to focused information relevant to particular users. Microsites are often briefer and have edgier content than main organizational sites. The use of these specialized sites generally provides easier searching by users, better tracking of users, and improved lead generation.

### Alternatives to Traditional Websites and Microsites

In recent years, an increasing number of organizations have established a web presence on social media sites – Facebook pages, YouTube channels, Wordpress blogs, etc.

For some small organizations, a Facebook page or blog can actually serve as an *alternate to have a traditional website*. These third-party sites provide valuable and easy-to-use tools, such as events promotion, discussions and chats, and the easy posting of multimedia

Organizations of all sizes are using social media as microsites to reach particular audiences, to promote particular products or services or pretest promotional ideas.

## Pull Versus Push Approach

Websites and most other web-based digital communications rely on a *pull* approach where the strategy is to attract visitors to the site where they can learn about the organization and take action. In this regard, marketer Seth Godin argues a website has only two purposes: The first purpose is to turn a stranger into a friend and then into a customer (member, donor, supporter, etc.) The second to be prompt action – by making it easy to order, request information, ask to be contacted, or share information with others.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the goal of much digital messaging is to drive visitors to website – an organization's main site, a microsite, or a specified landing page where people can take a desired action.

Modern websites typically serve one or more of the following purposes:

- **Information (Web 1.0)** – disseminates information and, in turn, collects data that can be used for research and feedback purposes.

- **Transactions** (Web 1.5) – enable the ordering of products and services or generate revenues for the site sponsor through advertising or subscriptions
- **Interaction** (Web 2.0) – facilitate dialogue and discussion *between* the organization and its constituents and *among* users. Such interaction engages users in activities that help build strong relationships.

## Website Effectiveness

Organizations can use a variety of content to promote themselves on websites. Tools include text, images, animations, audio, streaming video, downloads (music, documents), and forms.

Evidence suggests that users adopt new technology if it provides useful content and is easy to use. Experts outline various formulas for website success (see inset). For example, usability guru Jakob Nielsen ([www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com)) suggests that an effective website provides information users want, communicates clearly, and offers simple, consistent page design and clear navigation.

## Website Promotion

### Seven Keys to Effective Websites

- **Visually appealing** – inviting, information, undergoing constant reinvention
- **Valuable, useful or fun** – provides a reason to return
- **Current and timely** – pages are always fresh
- **Easy to find and use** – widely registered on search engines and uses keywords to find information
- **Intuitive on-page navigation** – includes hyperlinks, guideposts and returns
- **Involves the visitor** – engages each visitor through interactivity
- **Responsive to all users** – friendly to text, dial-up, physically/visually/hearing impaired, and non-English users

Source: [csis.pace.edu/~sachs/7keys.html](http://csis.pace.edu/~sachs/7keys.html).

Importantly, digital promotion managers must focus on both the *content* of websites as well as *promotion* of traffic to the site.

**Offline traffic building** includes exposing the website's web address and inviting visits everywhere possible. Typical activities include:

- Feature the web address in *collateral materials*, including business cards
- *Give away merchandise* (mouse pads, flash drives, calendars, coupons) imprinted with the address
- *Sponsor promotions, contests and sweepstakes* to drive traffic to the site
- Offer and promote *free downloadable content* (images, music, gimmicks, and reports) only available by visiting the site – known as “freemiums.”
- Include the website's address in publicity activities: *news releases, feature stories* and *press interviews*.
- *Advertise the website* or the service it offers in newspapers, magazines and television.

**Online traffic building** encompasses

- Point prospective visitors to websites via email and text and microblog messages.

- Optimize content to maximize exposure in search engines (see discussion about *search engine optimization*)
- *Cross-link* the site from other relevant organization web properties as well as blogs, media sharing sites, etc.
- Remind visitors to bookmark or to favorite the site on their web browser to easily locate the site later.
- Embed an *email button or email text link* that opens up the visitor's email client and allows users to send a link with others. Buttons are commonly labeled "Email a friend" or "Tell a friend."
- Incorporate *sharing buttons* so visitors can easily refer friends to the site or record their visit. The technique taps the viral nature of the Internet and simply involves simply downloading and embedding a short snippet of code from online sources such as AddThis.com. Share buttons can take visitors to social bookmarking sites (e.g. delicious.com) or review and rating sites (e.g. reddit.com or digg.com) where they can share comments. Or, share buttons enable visitors to generate messages to friends on social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace, Orkut, YouTube, Flickr, etc.)

## Traditional Versus Mobile Website Designs

Today, a successful website must be accessible on both computer- and mobile-based platforms.

Early versions of mobile websites were maintained separately from an organization's traditional site and their web addresses were either preceded with an "m." prefix or followed by a ".mobi" suffix. Today *responsive design* techniques are more efficient and allow creating a single set of website components that can be flexibly displayed on a



PC, tablet or smartphone. The user's experience is enhanced by providing easy reading and navigation with a minimum of resizing, panning across the screen or scrolling.

Responsive designs are created using HTML with advanced *cascading style sheets* coding. Web host can determine the type of device a user is using (PC, tablet or smartphone) with CSS3's *media query* function and then follows the display rules set by the website designer/developer for each type of device. Fluid proportion-based grids are used to determine the layout. Meanwhile images sizes are specified in relative sizes using percentages instead of fixed pixels or points.

Chapter 4 discusses more about mobile websites and how mobile displays must be taken into consideration in designing apps.

## SIDEBAR

### A Website Checklist

#### Technical

Operated by reliable website hosting service  
. Minimum downtime, scheduled maintenance  
Designed to display on 14- and 17-inch and larger wide screens as well as tablets and smart phones.  
Avoid needless animations, download issues  
Simple structure: most pages reached within 3 clicks  
Password-protected to avoid unauthorized access to proprietary information, child access to adult content  
Tie into organization data base, if appropriate  
Automate replies to emails, data submissions

#### Branding

Domain name: easy to remember, say, spell  
Domain name consistent with brand identity, relates to product  
Protected against cybersquatters and rogues (infringement)  
. Alternative spellings registered  
. Alternative suffixes reserved  
. International suffixes register/reserved

#### Content

Original, insightful, innovative  
Relevant, responsive to user's expectations  
Provide immediately useful information  
Current and timely  
Accurate, honest  
Authentic, transparent  
Refreshed regularly to encourage return visits  
Involves the user; enjoyable or fun  
Organized logically  
Copy units can stand alone  
Provide links to other related, useful sites  
Be watchful of humor, parody.  
Be culturally sensitive in content and design  
. Recognize potential international audience  
. Be watchful of unfamiliar allusions  
. Consider need for regionalized sites  
Enable users to take action online easily.  
Include key help tools:

. About Us page  
. Contact information--where to write or call  
. Site map  
. Search Function  
Include legal disclosures/privacy policy

#### Design

Simple, logical visually appealing  
Clear focal point  
Consistent layout and navigation—avoid surprises  
Avoid long text blocks, needless clutter  
Create distinctive personality, tone.  
Use pleasing, complementary, legible colors  
Intuitive and clearly labeled navigation  
. Hyperlinks take people to other pages  
. Allows return to previous pages, home  
. Use underlines for links only  
Sans serif or serif typefaces for headlines  
Serif typefaces for body copy more readable  
. Time Roman is typical browser default  
Avoid all caps.  
Follow usability, handicapped accessibility standards (Visit [www.usability.gov](http://www.usability.gov))  
Avoid scrolling down more than one screen  
Most important information should appear in top one-third of the page  
Use images, graphics, multimedia to connect users to message, enhance effectiveness  
Include "alt" tags/descriptions for all graphics

#### Writing

Appropriate to users, write from user perspective  
Be brief, succinct – avoid wordiness.  
Use simple, readable, specific language  
. Vary short and longer sentences  
. Short paragraphs (1-2 sentences)  
. Use concrete nouns, action and vivid verbs  
. Avoid needless adjectives, adverbs  
Avoid jargon, euphemisms, buzzwords, unclear references, market-ese/ad-ese, generalities.  
Friendly, conversational tone  
Feature anecdotes, stories, testimonials  
Use bullets, lists (ideal length: 3-5 items)  
Use words that sell: *free, new, you*.  
Employ search engine optimization techniques.

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# Planning a Promotional Website

Creating a website requires thoughtful planning and a strategic approach to achieve desired organizational outcomes

## Purpose of the Website

Begin by considering the organization's goals for the site, both offline and online. The accompanying inset suggests that websites run the gamut from primarily *promotional* (focused on supplying information) to primarily transactional (to facilitate the distribution of goods and services). Careful thought will help determine the right mix for a particular site.

**Client goals** might involve generating *sales, revenues, donations, votes, event participation* or, more generally, *advancing the organization's mission*.

### Website Purposes/Objectives A Continuum of Choices

*Primarily promotional*

- 
- Distribute information
  - Publicize ideas
  - Conduct research
  - Build relationships (through engagement, entertainment)
  - Service customers
  - Generate revenue from advertising or subscriptions
  - Generate revenue from transactions (e-commerce)

*Primarily commercial*

**Communications objectives** to achieve these goals might include *creating awareness, engaging audiences, generating positive attitudes, fostering predispositions* (behavioral intention), or *promoting intermediate actions* that lead to the behavior change or action ultimately desired (and which is presumably mutually beneficial).

*Offline actions* might involve visiting a store, placing a telephone call, voting during an election, attending an event, or sending a letter via postal mail. Websites can contribute to offline behavior change by moving people toward making a commitment. Examples of valuable *intermediate steps* include signing up for an email list, viewing a video or website, requesting information, arranging an appointment, making a reservation, or participating in an online conversation,

*Online actions* involve ultimate behaviors that occur online, such as when customers make purchases on an e-commerce site. Other online actions might be the organization's ultimate goal: taking a poll, forwarding an email to friends, sharing content with others, or making recommendations to others through devices such as a Facebook "Like" button.

## One or More Websites?

A fundamental question when developing a website program is whether a single new site can suffice an organization's needs? Or, from the outset, should the organization should plan multiple sites. (In some cases, an orderly transition plan to multiple websites might be required.) In some cases, multiple websites should be designed to be complementary; users can be freely encouraged to visit other sites. Examples include product microsites where consumers might be interested in more than one brand or product line. In other cases, the strategy might be to maintain separation.

### Process for Designing an Effective Website

- Analyze your audience
- Plan a structure
- Design the interface
- Assemble resources
- Build and test pages
- Upload to server
- Evaluate and revise<sup>1</sup>

A single website offers the benefit of consolidating content in a single location, with a single domain address. But information about multiple topics needs to be logically organized, searchable and clearly labeled so that users can navigate through the site easily and locate only the information of interest to them.

Multiple websites enable organizations to segment audiences based on demographics, user interests, or the sponsor's focus on particular products or services. Many very large organizations separate their corporate

sites from brand sites for this reason. Corporate sites typically support human resources, investor relations and public relations functions, while brand sites address marketing and sales by targeting only customers and consumers.

### Investment and Resources

A critical decision involves how much money an organization should invest in designing and maintaining a web presence. Organizations ideally should invest no more than necessary to attain desired outcomes – and thus should be cautious about over-spending.

Financial analysis involves *budgeting* and calculating the website's *return on investment*.

- Budget considerations include one-time *start-up costs* as well as the ongoing *annual expenses* related to maintaining the site. Besides *staffing* (the largest single component of most website operations), typical expenditures include *web hosting fees*, *website registration fees*, *hardware*, *software* and *content production costs* (copywriting, graphics, photography, videography, sound recording, etc.)
- ROI involves comparing the benefits generated compared to the expenditures. For commercial sites that generate revenues, ROI can be estimated as the website's marginal contribution to profitability vis-à-vis other sales channels.

### Oversight Management and Oversight

**Webmastering.** A website overseer is referred to as a *webmaster*. Today, webmastering involves two distinct roles: *content webmaster* (responsible for producing actual content) and *technical webmaster* (responsible for dependable and reliable operation of the system). Increasingly, these functions are fulfilled by separate (or multiple) individuals who work as a team.

**Governance.** Many organizational websites operate under the auspices of a *website committee*. Members include the principal units that use the site (marketing, public relations,

#### Checklist of Important Pages on Organizational Websites

- Home Page/Welcome Page – *entry page for site*
- About Us – *background about organization*
- FAQs -- *quick answers to frequently asked questions*
- Contact Us -- *email, postal address, telephone information*
- Site Maps – *text-based guide to where to find information*
- Disclosure pages -- *Legal requirements, privacy policy, etc.*

human resources, operations) as well as representatives of the organization's information technology (IT) unit responsible for all computing and networking. Effective governance involves establishing clear, consistent policies for content and system operations. Website committees typically make budget and policy recommendations, set priorities, monitor achievement of goals and objectives, assess site traffic, and coordinate promotion of the site.

**Web Hosting.** A website must be domiciled on a server connected to the connection to the World Wide Web. (A web host is different from an Internet Service Provider or ISP, where users subscribe to access to the Web or email.) Sites can be hosted on an organization's own server, on an outside specialized web hosting service, or on a system operated by a third-party-provider that supplies other IT services to the organization. Websites can be hosted in multiple locations (*mirror sites*) to reduce demand on a single server and to enhance service to users in different regions or areas of the world.

## Content Production

Responsibility for producing content can be organized four ways.

- In a *central production model*, all web content production is located in a web communications department that serves as an in-house production agency for user departments.
- In a *decentralized model*, operating units assume responsibility for creating and posting their own content with a minimum of support from the IT department.
- In a *mixed production model*, operating units produce much of the content, but rely on central website units for programming and posting content. Certain website functions are best handled centrally. Examples include application programming interfaces [APIs] that link the website to organizational databases and automation software used to process user requests or emails.
- In a *vendor model*, all work is assigned to an outside firm. Operating units are primarily responsible for directing content development and deployment.

## Site Branding

Choosing an attractive and distinctive web address is a critical decision. Web addresses are also known as *domain names* and uniform resource locators (URLs) – and are an important extension of an organization's branding.

The assignment of web addresses is governed by ICANN—the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers ([www.icann.org](http://www.icann.org)), a nonprofit consortium. Registration is managed through a network of several hundred accredited for-profit registration firms (registrars or registries) around the world. Registration fees currently are US\$35 per year.

### Checklist: Good Domain Names

- One word or short abbreviation
- Features organization or product/brand name
- Distinctive—avoids confusion with other websites
- Simple, easy to spell
- Communicates a benefit  
*Direct2Dell, ProtectYourself*
- Suggests an action: *2Tahiti*,
- Translates across cultures
- Short enough so specific web pages also can be easily promoted in communications:  
*www.digital.com/offer*



A domain name includes the site description (known as a *second-level domain*) followed by a period and a suffix (known as a *top-level domain* designation).

The first *generic TLDs* included: *.com* (commercial businesses), *.edu* (educational institutions), *.gov* (governments), *.info* (various organizations), *.mobi* (mobile sites), and *.net* (networks). Other *gTLDs* subsequently added included: *.aero*, *.asia*, *.cat*, *.coop*, *.jobs*, *.mil*, *.museum*, *.name*, *.pro*, *.tel*, and *.travel*.

In 2013 ICANN began adding more than a thousand additional gTLDs, and the assignment of responsibility for managing these continues to be assigned to site registrars. These cover a wide range of product, brand and special topic labels.

Alternatively, about 250 two-character international domain names (also known as *country codes* or *ccTLDs*) are in use worldwide. Examples include suffixes such as *.au*, *.uk*, *.de*, *.fr*, *.jp* and *.cn* – the top-level domain names for sites in Australia, United Kingdom, Germany, France, Japan and China, respectively.

Organizations seek to obtain the most desirable domain name not yet in use, plus variations on their main site name. As a result, obtaining and maintaining site registrations has become a time-consuming but important task. Alternative domain names commonly sought include

- variations of the organization's site name (including common misspellings)
- alternative gTLDs (such as both *.com* and *.biz*), and
- alternative ccTLDs (to reserve the name for future use and to preclude possible misuse by others).

Acquiring rights to multiple brand-related domain names helps address two problems that plague website branding:

- *Cybersquatters* speculate in the market for domain names by buying up unused or lapsed web addresses and then attempting to sell them (at inflated prices!) to organizations that want to use them for legitimate purposes.
- *Rogue website operators* sometimes attempt to confuse users by promoting sites with domain names strikingly similar to popular brands or web destinations in order to divert traffic to their own sites.

Legislation and court rulings in various jurisdictions worldwide have helped organizations protect trademarked brands from such unscrupulous infringement. But others seeking the use of a particular web address, such as political candidates or social causes, need to act early to reserve names they might wish to use -- and be vigilant in monitoring web address registrations. The availability of website domain names can be checked by conducting a search at [www.networksolutions.com/whois](http://www.networksolutions.com/whois) or on the websites of various site registration firms.

## Quality Control

As suggested earlier, the use of websites is driven by the usefulness of the content and usability of the site itself – whether can locate desired information and navigate through

the site quickly and easily and enjoy a satisfying experience. Both are indicators of website quality.

Quality assurance begins by assessing whether a site contributes to achievement of organizational goals and communication objective. A site must also meet the needs of its audience (based on their age, gender, general education, topic-related knowledge, and other factors).

Organizations need to set standards for both usefulness and usability. These include using a consistent editorial style, graphics standards, site structure and format. Sites should be reviewed periodically and updated as needed. Guidelines for assuring access by users with special needs also should be followed (see [www.usability.gov](http://www.usability.gov)).

With the increased dependency of both organizations and users on web communications, websites also must be *reliable*. Systems must have sufficient capacity to meet demand during peak periods of use. Regularly scheduled system maintenance can help minimize unscheduled downtimes.

Maintaining reliability or dependability also includes *contingency planning*. Standard practices today call for content managers to create templates for contingency pages that can be quickly posted whenever an organization confronts an emergency or crisis (also known as *black sites*). Similarly, prudent organizations operate mirror or backup sites (also known as *hot sites*) that assure the continuity of web operations in the event the organization's principal server becomes inoperable.

## **Website Redesign**

Many organizations periodically redesign their websites. Some do so as often as every 18 months! Complete redesigns are expensive and time-consuming efforts that should be undertaken only to improve a site's organization, navigation, search engine optimization, or functionality. Merely altering a site for change's sake, or to make merely aesthetic changes, rarely improves the site's effectiveness and might not be cost effective. Frequent design changes also disorient frequent users and should only be undertaken based on user-based satisfaction research and usability testing.

# Search Engine Optimization

One of the most critical aspects of website management is assuring that prospective visitors can find the site when seeking out information about a topic on search engines such as Google and Yahoo! Why? More than 80% of all website visits originate from search engines.

*Search engine optimization* (SEO) involves a series of proven techniques to enhance rankings of websites on major search engines such as Google and Yahoo! *Search engine results pages* (SERPs) are generated as result of search engines deploying automated software agents ("robots" or "spiders") that crawl the web to catalog (index) available information.

Submitting a site to each of the major search engines (or through a *website submission service*) is the first step in making search engines aware of a new website. However, the most important way to gain prominence on SERPs is to create content that is assessed as a most relevant and most useful to people when they enter a term in the boxes on search engine pages.

Search engines do not publish the algorithms or rules they follow to rank website or determine the order of listings, but periodically post announcements about changes that will a major impact on the results that users will obtain. However, various SEO consultants conduct analyzes of search engine results and publish reports in blogs and elsewhere about best practices. In SEO, the name of the game is to be listed on the first page of results returned for any search. Research shows that users are most likely to open one of the top three results.

This is a summary of some of the most basic SEO tools and techniques:

### **Four Key SEO Strategies**

SEO involves four key strategies: 1) optimize the structure of the site, 2) make use of vital HTML tags that facilitate the work of robots and spiders, 3) include keywords strategically, and 4) create both inbound and outbound links. The following of the most important tips for success:

#### ***Optimize the structure of the site.***

- For best results, feature 30+ pages of good content ~ more content provides greater opportunities to demonstrate relevance.
- Include 200+ words per page ~ better results are obtained with more content.
- Don't use frames or table formats, which trip up spiders
- Remember that spiders only search and can't "see" lavish graphics
- Include an "About Us" page. This short narrative can summarize all keywords.
- Include a site map (in the form of a *text* file with keywords)
- Validate all HTML code for accuracy.
- Fix any broken links as soon as they are identified.

#### ***Use important HTML tags.***

*Use title and meta tags within the HTML Header <head> of the document:*

- **<title> tag** (50 characters). This contains the description of the page that appears across the top of the browser screen when a page is displayed. Use a *different* title for every page within a site; don't repeat the same title for all pages on a site. Include client/product names and keywords in the title.
- **<meta> tags.** This code is invisible to users but provides key facts about page. Multiple meta tags are possible; the two most important are:
  - <meta NAME = "keywords" CONTENT = "your keywords here">**  
List all keywords that might match a search engine user's search terms within the quotation marks, separated by commas)
  - <meta NAME = "description" CONTENT = "your description here">**  
Provide a phrase or sentence that cogently summarizes the content of the page in narrative form. Suggested length: 150 characters.

Other possible meta tags within the <head> tag are:

*If the spider should not read page (sponsor does not want the page indexed)*

**<meta NAME="robots" CONTENT="noindex">**

*For a Google spider to rely on the description provided above instead of the first or random text appearing on a page (chosen by the spider):*

**<meta NAME = "googlebot" CONTENT="nonsnippet"**

*Throughout all pages*

- **<alt> tag.** Provide a *text alternative* for all graphics. These are the words that will appear on its space if an image cannot be displayed for any reason. Alt tags should include rich detail about what the user would see, and not be merely a label such as "truck photo." Provide brand and product names, keywords, and benefits (even prices). Spiders can only use alt tags to index photos. Alt tags are thus critical of you'd like Google to include your photos or graphics on its SERPs for images.

### ***Include keywords.***

*Keywords* are the probable search terms used by users. Put yourself in the place of the typical users searching for relevant topics. Include a variety of synonyms and alternative phrases can be the basis for the search engines matching a user's search terms to the content of your web page. Be wary of industry jargon; be sure to include keywords that reflect how ordinary people talk about the topic. Pejorative terms can be included in the keywords meta tag (accessible to the spiders) but not in the web page text visible to visitors. In addition to the keywords meta tag (see above), one or more keywords should be included in:

- The site's Web address (URL)
- All file names
- Left navigation bars (Spiders read these *before* the main text.)
- As *first* word in the top-level headline on the first page
- In the top-level headlines or labors for all secondary pages.
- In other second- and third-level heads, subheads
- (Avoid "click here.")
- The first 25 words of each page (repeated whenever possible)

A key strategy is to strike an ideal *keyword density*. Keywords should represent a about 4-5% of the total text and be dispersed throughout each page and the entire site. Write and use keywords in full sentences. Bulleted lists (with 3-5 items) are useful and should include at least one keyword. But avoid contrived lists of keywords, especially in same order, if only to repeat keywords. Be sure to include geographic locations (cities or states) as keywords people might search for, as applicable. Example: "New York City plumber."

## ***Use links effectively.***

Hyperlinks to other site provide valuable resources for users, and incoming links are an indication of the value of a site (see discussion below).

- Every page should be linked from at least one static link (an avenue for spiders to travel).
- Be sure page links navigate users back to home page.
- Use links from all other organization sites and applicable pages to the site.
- Arrange cross-links *from* other relevant, high quality third-party sites.
- Include links *to* other complementary, non-competing sites

## **Other SEO Tactics from Google**

**Rich Snippets.** Google's Webmaster's Tools (<https://www.google.com/webmasters/>) offer a variety of advanced tools to help websites become found on the Web and to make SERP listings more useful. These include the use of *rich snippets* that can compile and display detailed information from data bases associated with the site. Special formats are available on Google for more than a half-dozen types of pages, including sites featuring reviews, people, products, business and organizations, recipes, events and music. Google and other search engines have gone together through a cooperative called schema.org to recognize a common HTML5 structured data markup vocabulary. The use of structured data is expected to expand.

## **Precautions About SEO**

Website managers interested in maximizing site traffic should avoid trickery. Almost from its beginning Google has been vigilant in curbing chicanery by opportunists who try to manipulate SERP rankings. Search engine spiders are wise to common scams and can actually penalize rankings for:

- Keyword stuffing: Including hidden text (white on white, black on black) intended to be read by spiders, but not users.
- Duplicate pages: Featuring the exact same content but different names.
- Doorway pages designed for search engines only, not users.
- Link spam ~ fake sites that refer visitors to your site.

From early in its history, Google gave considerable weight to the number of incoming links for a site and used links as a factor when determining a site's *PageRank* (a scale of 1-10 used to compare websites). Website operators engaged in a flurry of shoddy activities for the sole purpose of maximizing links. These included using web-based link exchange services that charged a fee, establishing partner pages exclusively for the purpose of creating cross-links, and text-based advertising and advertorials whose primary purpose was to display a link. Other tactics included links embedded in advertising widgets and articles marketing schemes (see Chapter 7) where poorly written articles were generated using automation and placed on article directories solely for the purpose of creating inbound links to websites.

Beginning in 2011, Google announced major changes in its algorithms (known as Panda, Penguin and Hummingbird) aimed at improving the quality of results Google generates for users. In particular, Google went after these schemes by downgrading what it termed poor quality content sources (including “content” farms) and placing a premium on long-form “in-depth articles” and the context in which keywords appear. This altered SEO strategies in various ways and makes content quality essential.

Overall, the highest positions on search engine results pages continue go to sites that receive the highest traffic, include keywords relevant to search terms, feature more extensive content, and are linked from quality sources.

*The best advice is to design websites for users – not the search engines.* For search engine users, there are three basic types of search: *navigational searches* (users are looking for a particular organization or person), *informational searches* (seeking data about a subject or how to perform a task) and *transactional searches* (want to get something – whether a product or service, song, video, document or website tool or service). Keep these three different approaches in mind when designing a website.

## Types of Websites

Numerous varieties of websites can be used in digital promotion. These can be classified in various ways:

### *By type of sponsor*

- *Corporate websites* promote organizations as well as third products or services.
- *Educational sites* facilitate teaching and learning at schools and colleges.
- *Government sites* operate to inform and empower citizens at the federal, state and local levels.

### *By revenue or financial support*

- *Sponsor-supported sites* are operated and underwritten entirely by organizations that want to advance themselves or a particular product, service or idea.
- *Sales-based sites* (known as *e-commerce sites*) are profit-making enterprises that generate revenues from online purchases of products and services by visitors.
- *Advertising-supported sites* are profit-making enterprises that rely on revenue from search or display advertising to defray all or a part of their costs.
- *Subscription-supported sites* generate profits for the operators (or at least offset a portion of their operating costs) by charging users annual, monthly, weekly, daily or per-use fees to access site).

### *By function/content*

The most common way to classify websites is based on the service they perform or by the content they feature. See the discussion that follows.

Traditionally, organizations have relied on websites that they operate and host themselves (*sponsored sites*). In recent years, however, organizations have become increasingly dependent on *third-party sites* that are operated by others and where organizations can simply post content without being responsible for actual operation of the site. Examples include certain e-commerce sites, certain specialty advertising sites (see Chapter 5), and most social media sites (see Chapter 9).

### Three Major Categories of Websites Used in Digital Promotion

The following are the most popular categories of websites used by organizations to promote themselves and are discussed in more detail in the remainder of this chapter. These include *product marketing and e-commerce sites*, *customer relations sites*, and other *specialized organization sites*.

#### Product Marketing and E-Commerce Sites

- **Product promotion site** -- Describes organizations and their products or services and then invites queries.
- **E-commerce site** – Sells products or services online using secured credit card processing and automated fulfillment software. Sites can be devoted to either a single product or multiple products.
- **Specialty e-merchant site** – A third-party e-commerce site that specializes in a particular category of products from multiple manufacturers.
- **Auction Site** -- An online marketplace where people or organizations buy or sell new or used merchandise and pay a fee to the third-party site operator.

#### Customer Relations Sites

- **Consumer education site** – Informs customers about the proper, safe or best use of products using a soft-sell approach that reinforces purchase decisions.
- **Loyalty site** – Designed to engage or entertain customers by offering games, sweepstakes, contests, prize redemptions, or special rewards or activities for fans
- **Customer service/technical support site** – Assists customers following the purchase of a product by answering questions, resolving delivery or billing issues, or handling complaints.

#### Specialized Organization Sites

- **Online newsrooms/news site** – Supplies news, feature and other materials about an organization to journalists and bloggers.
- **Investor relations site** – Clearinghouses operated by public companies that issue stocks or bonds to provide financial announcements, reports, and other materials for investment professionals and individual investors.
- **Research site** – Disseminates information compiled by trade groups, professional societies, libraries and archives, or research organizations.
- **Donor site** – Used by not-for-profit and political groups to raise needed operating funds and to recruit volunteers.
- **Political action/campaign site** -- Advocacy and fundraising tools used by political candidates, ballot initiative sponsors/opponents, NGOs, and political activists. Goals are typically to influence decisions by voters or lawmakers.

## A Potpourri of Website Labels

Websites are created for various other purposes and go by various additional names. The following are prominent varieties of websites that are less commonly used by organizations to promote themselves. However, digital promotion principles and practices can be used to promote these sites.

- **Affiliate site** – Combines syndicated content from other content providers for a fee.
- **Archive site** -- Preserves electronic content threatened with extinction when websites are updated, e.g. archive.org.
- **Attack site** – Created by opponents to challenge another organization or cause's authenticity, authority or credibility.
- **Dating site** – Matches up people who pay a fee to use the service.
- **Fan sites (unofficial)** – Produced by audiences to promote, commemorate favorite movies, TV shows, books or the performers featured in them.
- **Gripe site** – Third-party site where people use threaded discussions as a forum to post complaints about people, situations or organizations.
- **Humor site** – Features satires and parodies of prominent people and others, primarily intended to amusement.
- **Links site**: Organizes hyperlinks to websites on a particular topic in a single place. Usually produced manually by private parties (versus automated search engine sites).
- **Literary site**: Publishes stories, novels, poems, and other creative works.
- **Media site** --Online outlet of newspapers, magazines, TV and radio station. Features *original*, *repurposed* or *curated* content.
- **News/information site**: Private online entity (not affiliated with a traditional media outlet) that supplies news or commentary on a specific topic such as technology or entertainment.
- **Personal websites** – Home pages of individuals hosted on own web server or a hosted site such as Yahoo!
- **Porn sites** – E-commerce site that trades in sexually explicit content on a pay-for-view, pay-per-download, or per-unit-sold basis. Some sites preview content available on other sites and/or feature related ads.
- **Portal sites** -- Online entry point to resources on the Internet or an organization's intranet.
- **Search engine site** – Compiles links to websites using automated or robotic agent software. Examples: Google, Yahoo! (compare to links site).
- **Shock site** – Features, images, or other material intended to offend most viewers.
- **Software sharing site** – Facilitates sharing of open source and other free software by users over the Web.

*Sites involved in illegal activities:*



- **Phishing site** – Operator masquerades as a trustworthy or familiar entity and deceives users so they unwittingly divulge personal, proprietary or financial information. Used for identity theft and other fraudulent purposes.
- **Warez site** – Offshore operator pirates digital files of software and entertainment fare that are sold to users in violation of the owner's copyright protection.

# Product Promotion and E-Commerce Sites

Commercial websites are used by marketers to promote and distribute various products and services. These sites generally feature hard-sell approaches that are the stock-in-trade of traditional advertisers, direct response marketers and catalog merchandisers.

## Product Promotion Sites

These conventional websites are used primarily to generate leads or queries for products or services products that do not lend themselves to being sold online directly. Both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations use product promotion sites to market their products and services.

Many product promotion websites feature splashy graphics and short, punchy text reminiscent of ads. By contrast, *informational sites* (also known pejoratively as *brochure sites*) are used to promote a company, product or service, using a more soft-sell, long-copy format.

Both product promotion and information sites use multiple web pages to provide basic descriptive information about products and services. Sites can be organized in various ways, but usually by product or by market segment served. Many sites include background about the organization – including history, background, operations, locations, and leadership.

In contrast to e-commerce sites where customers can buy online, product promotion sites guide prospective customers to a response form or landing page where they can complete a form to request additional information, set up a telephone appointment, or schedule a personal visit with an organizational representative. Alternatively, sites simply provide an email link or a list of store locations, postal addresses and/or telephone numbers.

*Postcard sites* are single-page sites that look like an ad or splash page and are commonly used as placeholders while a larger, more extensive website is under development. Postcard sites can include short fill-in forms or email links visitors can use to request information. Although they do not take full advantage of the web's interactive capabilities, product promotion sites at least allow organizations to establish a web presence.

## Proprietary E-Commerce Sites

Many marketers now operate sites that go beyond mere promotion and enable customers to order products or services online. Thus, the web serves as both a product promotion and *distribution* channel.

E-commerce sites lend themselves to selling low-to-moderately priced merchandise that can be shipped (and returned) via package delivery services. E-commerce sites are also ideal for products that can be downloaded directly to a computer or mobile device - e-books and e-reports, music and video, and computer or application software. E-

commerce sites can also process orders for larger, standardized products such as home appliances or electronics. However, buyers rarely purchase without investigating or inspecting these high-ticket items beforehand. E-commerce sites do not lend themselves to closing sales on high-ticket products where customers are concerned about making a risky or irreversible purchase. E-commerce sites also are not practical for products that require extensive customization, complex installation, or expert advice.

E-commerce sites rely on turn-key software systems that can be purchased from various software vendors. Key components include:

- A search function that allows prospective purchasers to locate merchandise
- Product information stored in a *content management system* (CMS) or database or on traditional HTML- and CSS-based web pages.
- An application program interface (API) that connects the website to the organization's inventory control system so that product information can be updated in real time as merchandise is added, deleted, goes out of stock, or is restocked.
- Transaction handling software where customers can add items to a "shopping cart" or similar ordering device. The software compiles the quantity for each item, calculates the charge, computes applicable taxes, and determines the total.
- A secured payment processing function so charges can be billed to the customer's credit card, online payment account (such as PayPal), or merchant charge account.
- A fulfillment management function that automates delivery of orders.
- A customer email or text messaging system that can send post-purchase communications to customers—acknowledgments, status updates, satisfaction surveys, additional offers, etc.

**Single-product e-commerce sites** are microsites that are similar to product promotion sites, but also permit full order processing. These sites usually promote only a single-product or two (or a single product with options). These sites frequently obtain product-specific domain names and are popular among smaller companies. Sponsors can run the sites themselves or contract with an outside firm.

Single-product sites can offer visitors rich and detailed information. These sites typically employ multiple pages intended to romance customers with the product benefits and features using text, images and videos. Beyond basic descriptions, supplemental information can include "About Us" and FAQ pages, customer comments, endorsements by experts, articles about trends in the industry, tips about how to use the product, and links to publicity coverage.

Because only a limited number of product options are offered, single-product e-commerce sites are often less complex and require simpler (and less costly) software compared to multiple-product sites. A fixed-format response form or order page allows customers to choose quantities and available options (sizes, colors, add-ons, etc.). Once all selections are made the customer proceeds to "check out." However, single-product sites can be highly sophisticated. These include sites operated by automobile companies can allow prospective purchases to create a customized vehicle online by selecting a model and then seeing how it might appear with alternative exterior and

interior features—different colors, trims and accessories. Similar tools can be used on sites in other fields, such as home furnishings.

**Multiple-product e-commerce sites** offer a wide assortment of goods for sale and thus are more complex and costly to operate. These sites typically are operated by large e-merchants or retail chains and function as electronic catalogues.

All product information—descriptions, images, prices and special instructions—are stored as data *objects* in a *content knowledge system* (CMS) or database -- and displayed whenever a customer queries a particular product. The site's home page typically lists categories of available products and highlights a few featured products or "specials," sometimes on a rotating basis.

Most customers are drawn to larger e-commerce sites based on their general knowledge about the merchant's offerings. Customers search for particular merchandise by name or keyword. Search functions also enable users to find merchandise by brand, by model, by specifications (widths, heights, colors, etc), or by inventory control (SKU) number.

Multiple products (usually 12 to 30) might be displayed on a results screen at one time. Customers can click on a product description or image to obtain product details. Compared to single-product e-commerce sites, the amount of information on any single product is a limited: a brief product summary, an image, and possibly lists of product features and specifications. Customers use an "Add to Cart" or similar button to order, but often shop for other items before proceeding to "check out."

Note: Today many large retail merchants give customers the option of ordering online, by phone or in person in a store. Importantly, many retail customers shop online, but then order in the store. Conversely, store visitors might see an item on display, but order it online from home later (a practice known as *showrooming* that can adversely impact store sales). Thus effective coordination of online and offline marketing offers and pricing are important. Online catalogs also can serve as sales aids for retail staffs. Brick-and-mortar merchandisers now use their online information system at their in-store catalog order desks.

### **Third-party E-commerce sites**

Beyond operating their own sites, many marketers sell merchandise through e-commerce sites operated by others. Two important types of these e-tailers include:

**Specialty e-merchants.** These independent e-commerce sites only operate online and attract customers by offering a wide array of merchandise from multiple manufacturers within a particular product category. Similar to retail stores, these e-commerce sites negotiate which lines or products to carry but usually want to carry all leading brands. E-merchants take possession, warehouse and ship merchandise directly to their customers.

Examples of specialty e-merchants include Amazon.com (books plus other merchandise), iTunes (music and videos), Crutchfield (electronics), Fragrances.Net,

Diapers.com, Gardeners.com, Fansedge.com (sports apparel and gear), Faucet.com (plumbing supplies), Dog.com, and Journey.com (shoes).

Similar to other merchants, e-tailers rely on suppliers for sales support. For example, many arrangements call for manufacturers to include links to e-merchant sites on their websites. Similarly, an important responsibility for digital promotion managers is to supply resellers with digital images and product information so products are merchandised to achieve maximum sales.

Selling through a specialty e-merchant provides a valuable additional distribution channel for marketers, but also can create visibility among prospective retail customers. These third-party sites also provide an online platform to monitor markets, including pricing by competitors and comments posted by customers.

**Auction sites** are independent online marketplaces that bring together sellers and buyers of products and services. Prominent auction sites include eBay, cquote, ebid.net, ecreate, onlineauction, ioffer, plunderhere, epier, etsy, cafepress, powersellersunit and ubid.

Smaller companies sometimes use auction sites to sell products directly to consumers or to reduce excess inventories. Sellers can post offerings for both new and used merchandise. All product information is entered by the seller directly into the auction site's CMS or database. Postings include merchandise names, descriptions, keywords, and prices. Prospective buyers can then search the site using common product names or other terms. Many sites allow buyers to sign up for email alerts or RSS feeds whenever new merchandise becomes available and alert interested customers prior to the close of bidding.

Auction sites provide several pricing options: Sellers can accept the *best bid* received during a specified bidding period (subject to a stated minimum bid) or can offer merchandise for a *fixed price* on a continuing basis. When a deal is consummated, the buyer pays the auction site using a credit card or a payment service such as PayPal. The auction site then takes a commission for handling the transaction and remits the proceeds to the seller's account. The seller then ships the merchandise to the buyer.

## Effective Online Product Promotion Practices

Using product promotion and e-commerce sites requires effectively communicating information about products and services. The following are best practices in this arena:

### Writing About Products – Some Guiding Principles

- Accuracy is paramount. Be truthful. Be complete. Avoid being deceptive.
- Write as if you are writing to single person – your one and only customer (not a crowd).
- Stress product *benefits* -- how products will transform the user's life and make life better. Each product should highlight a key *benefit* – a compelling promise that can differentiate it to all others in the same product category (sometimes known as a product's *unique value proposition*). Stress the product's benefits, not its *features*.

(size, speed, shape, operation, etc.). Use facts about features to *illustrate the product's benefits*.

- Promote a seller's most popular products prominently. Featured products or "specials" build interest, engage audiences, and can trigger the impulse to buy.
- Present related products together or sell them in combination (for example, offer a matching hat or scarf with a winter coat). Cross promotion increases the size of orders.
- Anticipate customer's questions or objections.
- Focus on how easy it is to order and how quickly the product can be put into use. Address how the customer can save *money* or *time*. Consider other appropriate appeals; safety, prestige, self-improvement, self-satisfaction, pleasure, etc.
- Help customers solve problems that are important to them. Answer the question, "What's it in for me?" Suggest useful tips and additional ideas for how products can be used.
- Use comparisons to other products when favorable. However, comparisons must be plausible and legitimate in order to be believable.
- Allay fears about risk. Promise 100% satisfaction. Offer a money-back guarantee.
- Always include a call to action – compel online visitors to *click*, *call*, or *visit*.

### **Tips for Selling Products Online**

- 24/7 access is assumed.
- Make product sites easy to find. Obtain a short and memorable web address.
- A search capability is critical on all larger product websites.
- Products should be no more than 3 clicks away from the website's home page.
- Keep the site fresh. Update content often (preferably daily) to give people an incentive to return. Use RSS feeds to notify customers about new offerings.
- Provide multiple ways for customers to contact the seller. Besides the response form or landing page, supply postal addresses, email addresses, short codes for text messages, and/or telephone numbers. These options are especially important for prospective customers not yet ready to order.
- Create a Store Directory database that enables users to enter their zip codes into a search box and then be directed to nearby retailers where products are sold.
- Content should be organized, consistent, and logical. Follow standard navigation conventions, and incorporate the same easy-to-use site navigation on all pages. Label hyperlinks clearly with language that is intuitive to the user.
- Always open response forms in a new window so customers to go back and forth to previous pages and to make changes in forms without losing data.
- Incorporate software that allows customers to rate products and share comments with others on the site. Recommendations by satisfied customers provide compelling reasons to buy and can prompt customer purchases.
- Make completing an order form easy as easy as possible. Rely on cookies to retrieve information already known about the customer and stored in the seller's database. Then, pre-populate the order form with the customer's account number or other identifying information. (Also allow updating information or making short-term changes, as required.)
- Provide multiple payment options. Enable users to print a receipt immediately.
- Encourage website visitors to pass information on to friends and families with "Share" buttons to sites such as Twitter and Facebook. Become a participant in the

Facebook Connect program so site visitors can indicate they “Like” a site or a particular product.

- If a customer leaves a website without buying, give them the opportunity to complete an exit survey about why they did not order. The survey can appear in a pop-under window.
- As mobile devices become more popular, mobile versions of e-commerce and product promotion sides (including response forms) become essential.
- Promote free shipping as a incentive to order
- Create special promotions around key buying periods – Valentine’s Day, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Back-to-School, Christmas/Hanukah, etc. Also plan special offers for Cyber Monday--the Monday following Thanksgiving, which continues to be one of the busiest online shopping days of the year.

### Copywriting: Describing Products

Good copywriting about products prompts action, enhances website usability, engenders trust, and optimizes search engine results. The goal is to inform, inspire and initiate action. Effective copy appeals to different shopper personas; shoppers have been characterized alternatively as being competitive, humanistic, spontaneous or methodical.<sup>i</sup>

The following points apply to writing about products:

- Always use positive language. Avoid needless negatives that can distract focus on your sales message.
- Be interesting and authentic. Causal, conversational language is best.
- Strive for provocative or out-of-the-ordinary product descriptions. Avoid generic boilerplate, hyperbole and hollow adjectives that lack believability.
- Provide complete information. More is generally better than less, but information should be parsed up to allow users to use as little or as much information as required. For example, after providing the basic description, use copy blocks or hyperlinks clearly labeled *Features*, *Technical Specifications*, *Use Suggestions*, *Disclosures*, etc.
- Identify keywords that customers intuitively associate with the product—including the generic terms to describe a product, not just fancy brand names. Use those terms in meta tags, headlines and text to enhance search engine optimization.

### Copywriting: Tips for Specific Online Formats

- **Websites:** Every page should feature a strong headline that features a product benefit or promise. Then, build a case for *why* the customer should buy the product *today*. Feature testimonials, case studies, examples, logical arguments, and/or emotional appeals.
- **Online catalog descriptions:** Catalog narrative descriptions are generally limited to about 75 words. Be succinct; avoid all unnecessary words. Phrases are sufficient. Begin by identifying the product using its exact name. Include all key descriptive information needed to make a purchase decision and that fits within the applicable

character count. Identify the model, year, size, color, quantity, etc. As possible, focus on a *benefit*, *pre-emptive claim* or *promise*. Address exceptions to the site's delivery guidelines or terms of sale, if any. Follow the site's convention for listing inventory numbers (SKUs).

- **Describing products in content management systems or databases.** Make sure every field is completed for every product. Use the maximum space available for product descriptions—and include all relevant information. Typical fields that must be completed are inventory number, product name/title, description (up to a specific word count), link to a web page or image, price, condition (new, nearly new, used, worn, etc.), specifications (height, width, depth, weight, quantity, etc.) and product category. (Identify all possible categories applicable to a product.) Include an SEO keyword field in the seller's product database. Include products names and brands in keywords, and incorporate keywords in product descriptions used in databases. Use standard spelling and grammar--avoid confusing abbreviations or jargon simply to save space.
- **Response forms.** When designing order forms or landing pages, confirm all required information is obtained—but nothing more. If the form cannot be pre-populated with information from a client's account, provide space for customers to list their last name and first name; billing address; shipping address (if different); city, state or province, and postal zone. Ask for a preferred telephone number (with area code). Use pull-down menus to assure accuracy in inputting courtesy titles (Mr., Mrs., etc.), states or provinces, and countries. Ask respondents to enter their email address *twice* to verify accuracy. Remember spaces to provide special promotional codes or preferred customer status. Request information about payment method: credit card type, account number, expiration date, and security code--if required for processing. Provide an easy-to-follow example for inputting data (whether to use hyphens, no spaces, etc.)
- **Disclosures and details.** Clearly disclose shipping and handling charges, taxes applicable to residents of particular jurisdictions, terms of sale, and other conditions (if any). Provide an estimated delivery date. Explain the seller's policy for merchandise returns. Always provide access to the seller's Privacy Policy. Always give customers the opportunity to receive future offers from the seller or the seller's affiliates. Make receiving email offers the default option -- let the customer opt out.
- **Post-Purchase Communications.** Take advantage of your system's email or text messaging capabilities to generate personalized messages to customers. Immediately send a thank-you message to acknowledge an order or query. When an order is shipped, send a second notification that provides the shipper's package tracking or control number, the date of shipment, the estimated delivery date, and a contact address or telephone number if the shipment does not arrive on a timely basis. After sufficient time has passed, send a final thank-you message that includes a short customer satisfaction survey. In all three messages, include an invitation (with a hyperlink) for the customer to place another order. Offer a special incentive to become a repeat customer.

## Illustrations and Design: Depicting Products



- **Illustrate products.** Graphics depicting products (images, animations, videos) are critical. Build the website's design to showcase products. Create a simple, consistent layout and colors that complement (rather than compete with) product images.
- **Photos:** Show products from several perspectives; highlight details or special features with insets. Provide color swatches that compare all possible choices. Illustrate the product in as many different colors as possible. Images should be accurate, clear, and of sufficient size to see critical details on first viewing. Enable users to enlarge photos to see detail.
- **Color photos** are most effective to illustrate products. Use of black-and-white images only to create special effects or if relevant to the product.
- **Quality videos** can be effective to illustrate key feature of products. Videos should be short, engaging, to-the-point, stress product benefits, and call for action. Be wary of videos or music that starts up automatically. Allow visitors to start videos and adjust sound levels.
- **Computer graphics.** In general, still images and videos are more effective than computer graphics. However animations can be useful to illustrate abstract ideas or services -- or to educate prospective customers about how complex products work.

## Customer Relations Websites

Marketers operate product promotion and e-commerce sites primarily to sell products and services. However, organizations employ a variety of other special-purpose microsites to support marketing activities in other ways. These include:

- Consumer education sites
- Loyalty/engagement sites
- Customer/technical support sites

Unlike product promotion and e-commerce sites, visitors do not come to these sites with the intention of being sold a product or service. Thus, all three types of sites take an indirect, soft-sell customer-centric approach that focuses on the customer *concerns, interests or needs* – not the benefits or features of particular products or services.

### Consumer Education Sites

**Consumer education sites/pages** are used by both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations to facilitate learning about *topics* relevant to an organization's products or services. Education sites provide a *context* for understanding the use of products and services and are particularly important when products or services involve complex ideas. Consumer education can reassure a customer prior to making a purchase and reinforce post-purchase satisfaction.

Consumer education sites can be created by advertising, public relations or consumer affairs/customer service units. Because visitors seek information, the primary response

tool on these sites typically is a landing page where a visitor can request further assistance. Hyperlinks to an organization's corporate site or product-related web pages might or might not be included.

*Product advice sites* provide information related to the proper use of items within a particular product category. Such sites are often operated by trade associations representing entire industries, but also can support individual brands or products. Topics might include how to select products (such as toys at Christmas), product safety, nutrition, common scams, and other consumer concerns.

*How-to sites* offer practical advice for using products. For example, the trade association for sewing supplies might use a website to promote sewing by homemakers. Similarly, home improvement stores might provide step-by-step instructions or tutorials for various do-it-yourself projects that use tools or supplies purchased at the store.

*Recipe sites* are used by food manufacturers, growers, importers, and retailers to provide serving suggestions for how various foodstuffs or kitchen equipment can be used to prepare tasty meals or as part of home entertaining. A major purpose is to increase overall demand by highlighting new or unusual uses of products.

*Project planning sites* enable visitors to explore options when planning activities ranging from travel and home improvements to weddings and funerals. These sites often combine background information and tips, details about product offerings, and tools to maintain records, set up a calendar, make lists, etc. Electronic bridal registries operated by major retailers are an example of a project planning site.

*Health sites* operated by health care providers, pharmaceutical manufacturers and medical device manufacturers address strategies for identifying, treating or coping with various physical and psychological maladies. Topics can range from basic child care and first aid at home to more complex issues, such as surviving cancer or grieving over a lost loved one. Targeted audiences include the afflicted person as well as their family and friends, and professional caregivers.

*Religious sites* promote faith by offering daily devotionals, sermon transcripts (video, audio or text), special courses, inspirational readings, and texts of holy works such as the Bible or Quran. These online materials supplement and reinforce in-person attendance at religious services or other events.

*Recruitment sites* are operated by educational institutions, branches of the armed forces, and many employers. Although these sites permit people to apply, their primary purpose is to orient prospective students, members of the military, or employees. Content includes insights about the organization, its activities, the experiences that applicants can anticipate, desired qualifications, and personal characteristics needed for success. The overall goal is to spark enthusiasm and interest.

**Effective Education Sites.** Visitors to consumer education sites seek answers to personal problems or concerns. A seller's product or service might be a viable solution –

but not always. Sponsors of consumer-education sites benefit by developing positive relationships based on demonstrating their understanding and caring for customers

Tips for effective consumer education sites:

- Focus on useful *information* – facts, not hype.
- Anticipate and then provide answers to the most commonly asked questions.
- Encourage good practices by consumers when they are purchasing, using or disposing of products. Discourage harmful or potentially risky behavior.
- Establish expectations in the minds of consumers about what they can expect from promoted products, services or experiences (and make sure your client's products meet those expectations).
- Use the opinions of expert authorities and key facts (statistics, etc.) to illustrate key points.
- Use plain language to explain complex ideas or technical terms. Use hyperlinks or footers to furnish required disclaimers or disclosures.
- Communicate clearly. Avoid euphemisms or ambiguous words. Use candor when discussing problems or pitfalls people should avoid.
- Be positive in tone. Whenever possible, focus on possibilities and opportunities, not limitations or restrictions.
- Promote self-efficacy by including reassurances that users can accomplish desired goals and tasks.
- Use specific features or benefits of your specific products or services to illustrate more general ideas.
- Subtly incorporate brand mentions only where natural or appropriate to do so. For example, many sponsored recipe sites only mention their brand names when listing ingredients: Hershey's chocolate, Pillsbury All-Purpose Flour, etc. No other mentions are required to achieve the site's goal.

## **Loyalty Sites/Brand Building Sites**

Marketers use these sites to *engage* online users of their products by providing rewards and entertaining experiences for prospective or current customers.

*Game sites* allow customers play rudimentary games of skill where they compete to attain a score and earn discounts or prizes. Typically, the best loyalty-driven games involve a simple but fun activity tied in to the product. However, a sponsor also can build loyalty by simply providing an entertaining pastime where the company's product serves as a prize. (Also see discussion related to other uses of digital games.)

*Sweepstakes sites* allow visitors to compete for the chance to win a prize drawing. Sweepstakes are commonly promoted offline to create marketplace excitement. Conducting an online sweepstakes is more cost-efficient than a mail sweepstakes. Online sweepstakes also enable organizations to easily create an email list of qualified current or prospective customers. At minimum, sweepstakes require entrants to provide their names and email addresses in exchange for participation. Sweepstakes are

permitted in most jurisdictions as long as no purchase is required. Otherwise, the sweepstakes is considered a private *lottery* (a prohibited activity in virtually all states).

*Contest sites* differ from sweepstakes because the winner is chosen based on demonstration of some skill, not chance. Online contests most often are based on production of a creative work that can be easily submitted and judged electronically (essays, short stories, drawings, photographs, videos, etc.). See Events #6 for details on organizing Online Competitions.

*Prize redemption sites* are incorporated in continuity programs where customers are enticed to make regular (continuing) purchases with the prospect of winning merchandise or other valuable prize. Frequent flier and frequent customer programs are commonly administered using promotional websites where participants track their progress toward a goal and/or redeem prizes. Similarly, fast-food and soft drink manufacturers sponsor retail events where customers receive a token or code when purchasing a meal or merchandise. Customers then go online to determine if the code matches a winning number (which can change daily or minute-by-minute). The more purchases a customer makes, the greater the chance of winning. Prizes are commonly coupons (printed or electronic) good for a free meal, food item or drink, or a discount.

*Fan sites* are important marketing tools used to promote performers or upcoming movies, television shows, recordings, books, or other entertainment fare. Official sites typically are heavy on entertainment content and feature videos (known as promotional *trailers*), photos, audio clips, background information, feature stories, games, blogs, podcasts and other devices. Official fan sites often also sell licensed promotional merchandise—recordings, posters, t-shirts—using e-commerce technology. Fan sites can also be created for products and retail stores. Sponsors invite loyal customers to become part of an exclusive club administered online. Membership rewards include downloadable coupons and membership-related materials (newsletters, membership cards, membership certificates) as well as the exclusive right to purchase self-liquidating premiums (t-shirts, etc.) relevant to the product or service. (Note: Although *unofficial* fan sites created by users can expand exposure, they can be problematic for promotional purposes because they divert traffic from official fan sites (and thus online merchandising opportunities) and can often be platforms for disparaging comments or criticisms of entertainment fare.)

**Effective Loyalty Sites.** Visitors to loyalty sites usually seek a *tangible benefit* of some sort – a prize, entertainment, etc. Visitors often have already purchased a product or service. As a result, heavy cross-selling, requiring additional purchases, or imposing arbitrary restrictions can dampen visitors' enthusiasm.

Tips for customer-loyalty sites:

- Focus on fun – create a sense of excitement by featuring splashy graphics and short, snappy text.

- Don't disappoint visitors. Reinforce the satisfaction that visitors already feel about having purchased a product -- or the excitement of potentially purchasing a product or service (such as seeing an upcoming movie).
- Directions: Provide simple, clear directions on sites that involve contests, sweepstakes or prize redemptions. Clearly indicate beginning and ending dates, and when prize winners will be notified. (Better yet: Don't make them wait -- make visitors instant winners!). Disclose complete eligibility rules or restrictions prominently. Use a hyperlink or an extensive footer at the bottom of the page to provide additional details.
- Games should be simple and easy. Allow visitors to win a modest prize relatively easily and then compete for bigger prizes if they wish to do so.
- Contests: The criteria for judging contests should be clearly explained. Ideally, judges should be independent experts not affiliated with the contest sponsor to minimize any claims of bias. Rules should clearly state that the decision of the judges is final and that entries become the exclusive property of the contest sponsor and can be used by the sponsor for promotional purposes.
- Official fan sites should be clearly labeled as such so the site's official status is readily apparent to visitors and appears on search engine results pages. If selling merchandise, follow best practices for an e-commerce site.
- Limit the amount of personal information that visitors must provide, usually only first name, last name and email address should be required. Collect additional information only if it actually will be used to qualify participants as prospective customers or direct mail recipients. Always disclose the sponsor's Privacy Policy.
- Branding: Loyalty sites should complement and be consistent with the branding strategies of the websites for the products or services they promote.

## **Customer/Technical Support Sites**

Marketers also use websites extensively to provide after-sales service and assistance to customers. These sites operate as part of integrated *customer care programs* that also include consumer affairs units and customer call centers that respond to queries received by mail and telephone. Customer support sites dramatically reduce the cost of after-purchase support by driving traffic to the websites where customers can obtain answers to many routine questions themselves. Websites also provide a platform where organizations can consolidate all support documentation used by their own staffs.

Typical content and functions found on customer and technical support websites include:

*Product manuals, operating instructions and warranty information.* These duplicate materials typically provided with products when sold.

*Installation or assembly instructions.* Step-by-step procedures can be explained using text, progressive web pages, animated illustrations, photographs, and videos.

*Troubleshooting operational problems.* Checklists and interactive queries can be used to resolve problems, including common customer assembly or installation errors.

*Scheduling of repairs or arrangement of replacements* for products still under warranty. Interactive fill-in forms allow customers to arrange service at a convenient time, date and location. Customers can even print out postal or package delivery service mailing labels for returning defective merchandise.

*Referrals for technical assistance* outside the company (such as products out of warranty)

*User collaboration.* Easily installed software allows marketers to sponsor chats, forums, blogs, wikis and similar collaborative tools to foster discussions among customers. These tools are particularly popular for high-tech products and are used by software developers, analysts, programmers, and tech-savvy consumers.

*Complaint sites/pages* enable consumers to redress problems on special sites monitored by organizational officials. In general, it is preferable for customers to post complaints here instead of on a public “gripe” site or before launching a viral messaging campaign about a product using email or a microblog such as Twitter.

*Product recall sites* publish information when products have been found to be defective or hazardous, and customers are instructed to no longer use a product. Affected customers can register online, arrange repairs or replacement, or request to be contacted by a company representative for personal assistance.

**Effective Customer/Technical Support Sites.** Visitors to these sites seek *solutions* to *specific* personal problems they encountered with an already-purchased product or service. These sites focus on *instructions* -- providing clear, precise directions to help the customer assemble, install or properly use products. Many visitors are already frustrated by the time they visit a customer relations/technical support site. Thus, good customer support sites also assuage customer dissatisfaction and strive to restore brand loyalty and confidence in the product or service provider.

Tips for effective customer relations/technical support sites:

- Provide 24/7 access.
- Make it easy for customers to specifically identify and describe their problem and to request assistance.
- Use the most appropriate mechanism to respond: email, instant messaging/chat with a service representative, a group chat, or a telephone conversation with a service representative.
- Thoroughly understand how products or services work and don't work -- and the most common concerns or complaints.
- Highlight the most frequently asked questions on the front page of the site to provide quick solutions to the most common and routine or current questions.
- Carefully track topics and issues of concern to customers to identify emerging problems and longer-term trends.

- Archive copies of all assembly, instructional and warranty materials provided to customers on the website. Enable both customers and customer service representatives to search the data base by product name, number, or topic.
- Allow free downloading of materials in HTML or PDF formats. Limit charging for materials (such as printed manuals or CDs), except as necessary.
- Use a series of screening questions to enable visitors to pinpoint their problem.
- Online instructions should include simple and numbered step-by-step directions. Use diagrams and illustrations (also keyed by letter or number) to illustrate procedures. Use specific language and precise measures, but describe procedures in everyday language. Always pretest instructions with typical users, especially if experts or novices.
- All information should be self-contained in the same page. Use hyperlinks selectively, but only to provide background, definitions or tips.
- Ask visitors to register by providing their name and email address and product information (model numbers, serial numbers, etc.) only if actually required to resolve the problem. Provide specific directions about where model and serial numbers can be found on a product.
- Registration allows collecting email addresses that can be used in future recall and other notifications or with new product announcements (if the visitor opts in to receive such emails).
- Track how each query is resolved and use a follow-up email survey to assess customer satisfaction. Determine if additional follow-up would be mutually beneficial.
- Customer communications should always be cordial, respectful and demonstrate a commitment to resolving customer concerns on a timely basis – regardless of how disgruntled a customer might act.

## Specialized Organization Websites

Beyond customers, organization use websites to reach a variety of other important constituents. For example, public relations units operate *online newsrooms* to supply news and information to journalists and bloggers. (See Chapter 6) Websites also direct organizational information to investors, researchers, donors, political supporters, and citizens concerned with social issues.

### Investor Relations Sites

Publicly traded corporations that issue stocks, bonds or other securities use websites to supply investment information to institutional investors/analysts, retail stock analysts and brokers, and individual investors. Websites have proven to be powerful tools to fulfill the requirement of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission that companies to promptly and fully disclose *material information* – news and information that might influence an investor's decision to buy or sell a security.

Investor relations websites are an ideal way to provide access to the vast amount of detailed (and required) financial data desired by investors. Use of the Internet for

investor relations has been enhanced by policies of the SEC and the major stock exchanges that now encourage electronic delivery of investor materials that previously were printed and mailed. Examples include annual reports, notices of shareholder meetings, and proxy statements.

Tips for effective investor relations sites:

- Organize a separate IR section on the corporate website or a separate microsite specifically for investor relations activities.
- Use the web to post all SEC filings, including annual reports on Form 10-K, quarterly reports, and special reports. Also provide a link to the SEC's EDGAR system ([www.edgar.gov](http://www.edgar.gov)), which compiles electronic filings submitted to the SEC.
- Design the company's glossy annual report to shareholders for online distribution. (Most companies continue to produce a scaled-down glossy document the focuses on management's review of operations.)
- Archive corporate news releases in reverse chronological order by year and by month. Announcements typically covers topics such as earnings, dividends, stock splits, acquisitions and mergers, major new contracts, litigation, and other major corporate events.
- Post other useful information for investors: a company fact book, biographies and photos of senior management, a history of the company's stock price, a capital gains calculator, and a directory of facilities. Also include information about the stock's transfer agent, independent public accountants, and information about the date, location, and proxy process for voting at the corporation's annual meeting.
- Provide links to analysts' reports about the company as well as major favorable press coverage.
- Allow investment professionals to access web conferences with company officials and live webcasts of presentations, shareholders meetings and other company events. Archive audio recordings and videos of these events for easy access by interested investors later.

## **Research Sites**

Research sites enable government agencies, research institutes, foundations, trade associations, professional societies and political action groups to respond to requests for information that they compile as part of their ongoing activities. These reports can help create visibility and advance the mission of the organization.

Many organizations began compiling historic data and other information in digital form in the 1980s and have launched programs to digitize older, analog records to facilitate electronic delivery to users, to preserve materials, and to reduce storage and handling costs.

Requests typically come from research analysts working for industry or government, consulting firms conducting competitive intelligence, legal researchers, and individuals who seek public or industry information for their own purposes. Libraries, archives and genealogical research centers often assign responsibility for fulfilling requests to



research personnel. Other organizations assign response duties to staff units such as public affairs or public relations.

Federal, state and (many) local governments are subject to Freedom of Information Acts (FOIAs) where they are required to provide specified information about activities that are not already disclosed to the public. Websites are typically used to collect FOIA requests. Responses are typically provided by attaching documents to emails, by providing links to websites, or by transferring spreadsheet and database files using file transfer protocol (FTP).

Tips for effective research sites:

- Consider all applicable modes in which information might be digitized to fulfill requests: digital text, scanned documents (PDF or similar format), spreadsheets or databases, or digitized image, sound, or video files.
- Make it easy for legitimate researchers to request information. Create a special page on the organization's website devoted the most frequently requested materials. Provide an easy-to-use request form that asks for pertinent name and contact information. As appropriate, make it possible for requestors to explain the specific information needed.
- If requestors must be charged, use secured software to permit payments by credit card or other electronic payment system. Be sure to fully disclose all costs and follow best practices for secured e-commerce sites.
- Post instructions for how the organization should be properly cited as the source, including a website URL, if applicable.

## **Donor Sites**

Providing opportunities for supporters to make financial contributions are integral parts of the websites operated by most not-for-profit and political advocacy groups.

Similar to businesses, these organizations can use websites to generate revenues from the sales of products and services. However, these organizations rely on the web to solicit resources vital to their continued success: financial donations, in-kind contributions of merchandise and services, and commitments of time by volunteers.

Tips for effective donor sites:

- Showcase the good works of the organization with timely updates about the organization's activities, recent accomplishments and current needs. Feature the people being served -- and focus on how the good works of the organization are transforming people's lives.
- Keep sites current. For example, organizations involved in disaster relief post updates on a daily (or more frequent) basis about their efforts to overcome suffering from earthquakes floods, fire, famine, and other disasters. These organizations combine current news with appeals for assistance.

- Use response forms (landing pages) tied to the same kind of secured software use in e-commerce. Ask for all necessary personal information to acknowledge the gift and track donors. Always encourage visitors to opt-in to receive future information (and solicitations) from the organization. Challenge contributors to consider giving higher amounts by suggesting alternative giving levels – but always provide an open option so people can give more or less.
- Establish special web pages or microsites to support the organization's separate capital campaigns, annual giving or other special fundraising appeals.
- Allow volunteers to indicate their interests, skills and availability by completing response forms that identify areas of greatest need. Request permission to contact volunteers and ask for the best time and way to contact them (email, text message, telephone call, etc.)
- Include important background about the organization that will of particular interest to larger prospective donors. These include the organization's detailed *case statement* (describing the work of the organization in detail), the organizations *audited financial statements*, and the charity's *IRS tax exemption number* assigned to all qualifying 501(c)(3) organizations. Such information is expected by foundations, grant-giving agencies, and larger prospective contributors.
- Include a downloadable PDF version of the organization's printed annual report.
- Prominently acknowledge donors through online feature stories and lists of contributors.
- Register websites of qualifying charities with one or more of the *charitable portals/directories* used by people seeking places to give. Examples are NetworkforGood.org, 4charity.org, GreaterGood.com, and Groundspring.org.
- Use website links to promote additional opportunities for support. For example, provide supporters with links to one or more of the popular *charity shopping malls* where *registered* charities can earn a percentage from merchandise purchases. Examples include Igive.com and GreaterGood.com. Also enable supporters to solicit their friends and family on the organization's behalf using specialized social networking sites such as Firstgiving.com.

## Political Action Sites

Political candidates, supporters and opponents of ballot initiatives, and political advocacy groups all operate websites similar to donor sites to marshal monetary and volunteer resources in support of their causes. Political organizations today pride themselves on their ability to raise money from a large number of small contributors on the web. These sites follow most of the strategies previously outlined for donor sites.

Importantly, political action sites also use the Internet to encourage *public participation* by ordinary citizens. The following are tips specifically for using websites to involve online publics in political action activities:

- Articulate positions on current legislation and contemporary social problems through online position papers. Such statements will be of particular interest

- to supporters, political professionals and ideologues, and journalists and bloggers. Update position statements as required.
- Prominently promote upcoming events—speeches, testimony, rallies, etc. Invite supporters and others to attend, as appropriate. Enable prospective attendees to RSVP online. Use email and robocalls (*robotic* or *automated* telephone calls) to send attendance reminders and post-event reports.
- For grassroots lobbying campaigns, provide tools that enable citizens to contact government officials on the cause's behalf. Information about lawmakers can take the form of lists, search boxes or hot maps in which users can locate their own electoral districts. Provide addresses for sending either postal mail or email correspondence (preferably with embedded email hyperlinks). Provide suggested talking points or a template for the message — but always encourage supporters to write a *personalized* message and to *avoid* sending what appears to be a form letter.
- Alternatively, enable people to sign an electronic petition.
- Supply materials that staff or volunteers can download, reproduce and distribute: sample letters, fact sheets, brochures, posters, fliers, etc.

## **Social Issues Sites**

Many for-profit and not-for-profit organizations devote sections of their websites or create microsites to discuss current social or political issues that are relevant to their activities.

Social issues websites typically on devoted to controversial topics, such as corporate social irresponsibility, protecting the environment, health care reform, immigration, fair trade, alternative energy, equal opportunity, or regional or local issues. Organizations use these sites to summarize their concern or relevant experience, to advocate a position, or to encourage public discussion. Such sites might or might not provide a specific call to political action.

Tips for effective social issue sites:

- Use the site primarily to explain complex issues in simple, everyday terms. Then provide hyperlinks to more detailed sources of information – including credible sources from both inside and outside the sponsoring organization.
- Report on the sponsoring organization's record of accomplishment on the issue, such as how the sponsoring organization protects the environment. Provide short, downloadable printed statements and support materials. Supplement text materials with streaming videos, photographs, graphs and charts. Use a positive, forthright tone if the issue involves a topic about which the organization has been criticized. Avoid being defensive, and be wary of being petty by attacking critics.
- Encourage site visitors to express their opinions through email, an online survey, or by posting a comment on a public discussion board or chat operated as part of the site. Respond to submitted comments, as appropriate.

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