

Is Your Site 'Web-Worthy'?

By Seiche Sanders, Editor

Today, jan/san distributors who maintain a company website are more the norm than the exception. Whether those websites provide customers and prospects with the information they're looking for — that's another story.

Given the day-to-day demands of running a successful jan/san business, it's common to put the company website on the back burner. At some point, though, it's worthwhile to step back and make sure

ly put together, poorly planned, badly implemented, allowed to become outdated, and difficult to use can hurt you," she adds.

Recently, Smallbiztechnology.com featured an article titled "Building Business Class Web Sites: 10 Web Site Musts." The article offered poignant information for distributors — information worth sharing. *SM* editors followed up with a few experts to provide industry-specific perspectives for distributors interested in making their websites stand out.

1. Focus on the customer

Experts suggest making sure that website content is crafted to fit the intended audience. This is an important point, says Steve Epner of Brown Smith Wallace, a technology consulting firm in St. Louis. "Too many sites just tell about the company and forget the customer is only interested in themselves. [Customers] really do not care that much about your

building or history."

When it comes to your site, customers tend to be "self-centered" — and rightfully so: "What I want to hear is, how are you going to help me?" Epner says.

2. Have a plan

"What do you want the site to do for you? Is it a marketing, sales, transaction processing?" asks Epner. Each different result requires a different design."

A website should be treated like any

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Move Over Microsoft...

Microsoft's Internet Explorer has company: the **Mozilla Firefox** web browser entered the browser arena in November, and has cornered nearly 10 percent of the market.

The reason for its success? Its user-friendly features, including pop-up blockers and tabbed browsing so users can toggle between multiple windows. Its search function also looks for a word while you type it.

A product of efforts of a consortium of volunteer programmers, it's available for download for free at mozilla.org.

ISSA Endorses *SM* Sister Publications

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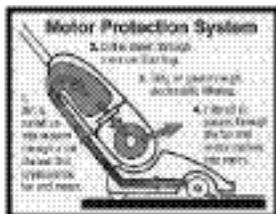


your website is conveying information — and performing for customers — the way you want it to.

"View your website as an extension of your company's marketing plan and customer-support system," suggests Janeson Keeley, website consultant for JTKWeb, based in Roanoke, Va. "A well implemented website can be a terrific advertising tool, as well as a method of providing services and information to your existing customers. But a website that is haphazard-

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other part of a successful business plan, says Keeley. "Websites are becoming as common and expected as business cards, fax machines and e-mail addresses," she says. "If you are going to have a website, it must be an integral part of your business plan, and you must make a long-term commitment to maintaining it — in terms of both time and money."

3. Have an easy-to-remember name

"If you want people to visit your website, they have to know the website address," Keeley explains. "No one wants to have to look up a domain name every time they want to visit a site. You want potential customers to be able to remember the name even if they weren't near a computer when they saw or heard it. You want your existing customers to refer to your site frequently for new information and customer support. In order to achieve these goals, your website has to have a name that's easy to remember."

Keeley suggests that companies secure their business's name for their Web address. If it's not available, develop a descriptive alternative. "This might derive from an existing company slogan or might be used to develop one. You'd be surprised at the number of very clear and easy-to-remember domain names that are still available." She also suggests steering clear of the .net and .biz domains — people don't remember them, she says.

4. Make it easy to navigate

"Website visitors are becoming increasingly impatient," says Keeley. "If they can't find what they want to know on your

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website quickly, they'll happily go on to the next one on their list. Make it easy for your visitors to find what they want."

Epner agrees. "Three to five clicks is all most people are willing to invest in researching a site before leaving," he says. "If they do not find what they wanted that quickly, they will go looking elsewhere."

5. It should be informative

"Websites are much more like catalogs than advertising brochures, so give at least as much information on the website as you would in a printed catalog," says Keeley. "Even better, remember that Web space is less expensive than print documents, so add some information about the products or services — multiple uses, additional pictures, testimonials from clients — than you would in a print catalog."

Joanne Glasspoole, owner and president of Glasspoole Web Development, Minneapolis, agrees: "If the website is an e-commerce site, it makes sense to give an explanation of what the product is, and any kinds of tips on how to use the product properly, and spec sheets."

6. It should be secure

Customers need reassurance that the information they provide is secure. Distributors should also have a privacy policy in place, assuring customers that their information will not be sold or used inappropriately.

"If you don't have one, browse the Web until you find an appropriate policy and can customize it for your company, or

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even better, contact the Better Business Bureau for its guidelines," says Keeley.

7. Make it easy for customers to contact you

"Legitimate businesses should advertise not only e-mail addresses, but their snail mail addresses," says Glasspoole. "It gives people a secure feeling." Telephone and fax numbers also make it easy for customers to contact you, she adds.

A website should speak to the people

you're attracting: "So when people get to your website, you need to help them to know what the next step is," she says.

Keeley suggests providing contact information in the same place on each page of the site. Make the information prominent — consider putting it on the top instead of the bottom of the pages. And provide a variety of contact methods.

"Without a doubt, the biggest mistake is not to have your telephone number on

every page," says Epner. "Never make a prospect search for how to contact you in person or to get a question answered by a live person and not an e-mail. Not everyone that finds you online will want to communicate online as well."

8. Provide fresh content

Fresh content makes customers more likely to return to the website regularly. Distributors might consider posting new product descriptions on the home page, writing a Web blog on industry issues or featuring a series of customer testimonials, suggests Glasspoole.

Distributors can attempt to draw customers to the website with e-mail mar-

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Website Front-Runners

Jan/san distributor websites run the gamut when it comes to design and functionality. From the simplistic "info site" to the more complex world of password-protected, personalized Web ordering, distributors are at various stages of establishing their online presence.

Coastwide Laboratories, Wilsonville, Ore., and MASSCO Inc., Wichita, Kan., both introduced websites around 1998.

Steve Weber, information services manager of Coastwide, built his company's website. He says the content is constantly evolving to reflect customer preferences. A popular feature is the "Ask the Chemist" page, where customers can ask cleaning questions to Coastwide's on-staff chemists, and receive personalized responses.

"We're not an 8-to-5 business," says Weber. "A website lends itself to that because it doesn't have time constraints."

Another feat: 1,100 customers use Coastwide's "premier pages," allowing customers secure access to their order history and status.

Coastwide's Web content also includes extensive technical information, including downloadable MSDS sheets and product literature.

T.J. White, IT manager for MASSCO, says while his company's website has been around for some time, its future will rely on how its customers' demands change.

Current customers have access to password-protected online ordering. Customers have a "quick-list" shopping list to work from, and they can order easily by typing in product numbers or searching by category or key words. What's next for the site?

"We're waiting for the market or the customer base to catch up and start demanding that we offer more on the site," White says. — S.S.

keting — offering discounts available only through the website, she says. “Maybe a discount on shipping, or buy-one-get-one-free — special promotions that are only available to website buyers,” Glasspoole says.

“Regularly updated content not only provides visitors with new information, it also reassures them that you are paying attention to the website,” says Keeley. “Nothing says ‘run away’ faster than a two-year-old ‘last revised’ date or a reference to a ‘monthly sale’ from 2004.”

Keeley’s suggestions:

“Publish a newsletter or place articles on your site. These are great ways to make your site rank higher in search engines for more terms, and often, other websites will link to your articles to add information to their sites. You can often subscribe to other services or find articles on the Web that you can use (with the author’s permission) on your site,” she explains.

9. Make it easy to find

“Visitors to websites have very short attention spans, so be sure to make it easy for them to find what they want quickly. Anything that complicates the website’s readability or navigation is a definite no-no,” says Keeley.

Use a consistent layout, avoid long blocks of text, and use color and font types to highlight key pieces of information, she suggests.

According to Glasspoole, having a website is no longer an option, it’s a necessary way for customers to reach you.

“Today, people expect that the company that they’re going to be doing business with has a website,” she says. “For a business to be seen as a legitimate, credible business, it’s critical that they have a website. It makes it easy for people to do business with them.”

One common question b-to-b business owners must ask is who do you want to attract to your site? Many distributors want current customers to be able to research products and place orders on their site; others see their website as a marketing tool, hoping to attract potential customers.

Once business owners pinpoint their website’s intended audience, they can decide how to “screen” visitors to the site. For instance, having a \$300 minimum on orders placed on the website

will discourage someone from ordering a single squeegee or chemical.

They can also find ways to rank higher in search engines. Many business owners find it beneficial to hire a Web consultant when it comes to identifying and indexing key search words, and comparing the site against competitors’ sites.

10. Keep it simple

“When I design a website, I like a very clean website. I like to use color, and pic-

tures only if they make sense,” says Glasspoole. “Flash” sites, for example, are not necessary for an informational or e-commerce distributor website.

She adds: It should be well structured, easy-to-navigate, and have subheads, bullets, etc., that make the information — which should be clearly worded — easy to find and easy to understand.

Distributors should keep these 10 website rules of thumb in mind as they refine their online presence. ■

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