



Illustration by Cyrus Deboo

Net profit

AN ESSENTIAL BUSINESS TOOL OR
A TECHNOLOGICAL INDULGENCE?
NIGEL WHITFIELD LOOKS AT
MARKETING ON THE INTERNET
AND AT HOW THE SMALL BUSINESS
CAN GET THE BEST VALUE FROM
GOING ONLINE.



SOME ESSENTIAL ADVICE ON INTERNET MARKETING

Marketing on the net is still pretty new, and there's no definitive answer to many questions, but here are some guidelines that will help make sure you fit within many of the accepted conventions. You don't have to follow them, but if you don't, at worst, you'll incur the wrath of many users; and at best, people will find it harder to access you via the net than they need to.

➡ **Always ask permission** before adding an email address to a list. If you request addresses on your web site, don't add them to a list by default. It's better to have a box unchecked, and ask people to check it if they do want to receive email, than to assume the reverse.

➡ **If you collect data** about visitors

to your site, make sure you register with the Data Protection Act.

➡ **Keep emails that you send out** telling people about your web site or your services brief, and always include information near the top to explain to people how they can make sure they don't receive any more messages. If you have a lot of information, it may be best to send a brief message with a pointer to a page on your web site.

➡ **No matter how useful** you think it might be, don't send people email with attachments. Some people won't be able to use them, and others will simply delete messages in case of viruses. Use plain text instead.

➡ **Be very careful** about how you promote your web site in newsgroups. If in

doubt, simply don't do it. Read the group's charter before posting, and make sure any announcement is relevant to the group, brief, and not too commercial. Flooding discussion forums with adverts is a good way to generate complaints, not business. A short signature on postings is less intrusive.

➡ **Never, ever** use bulk emailing programs. They're offered on the net, with millions of addresses, and most of those won't be suitable.

➡ **Keep it simple.** Multimedia and fancy graphics can spice up a site, but if they take too long to download, people won't bother. Many site visitors will want to know basic info, like phone numbers or prices. Make it easy and quick to find.

PICK UP THE LEAFLETS FROM ANY INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDER that's trying to attract business customers, and you'll read lots of information about how the internet can be an essential part of your business.

But what does that really mean? Is it just the usual fatuous waffle that marketing people use when they want to sell you something, or can the internet actually be a good tool for marketing your business? And how do you go about it?

More importantly, how can you do all this without upsetting people? The internet can certainly be a useful tool, but many of its users are also extremely reluctant to let it become excessively commercialised. Careful planning, therefore, is necessary if you don't want current

and potential customers to end up with the wrong impression. Perhaps one of the most important things to remember about internet marketing is that anyone can do it. Although it can cost a lot to have a professionally designed web site — some industry figures put the amount spent by the BBC on its online presence at tens of millions — you can also have a presence for much less, and you don't need to invest in high-speed links to the net. For a small business, in fact, you might not even need a computer and modem in the office, although obviously being able to send and receive email will help tremendously in dealing with your clients.

A web site is the obvious presence to have on the internet; for many people wanting information, it will be a logical first point of call when they want to know about your company. It's also your

online brochure, a first stop for many people, so it pays to make sure that it's easy to use and answers more questions than it raises.

There are other ways of using the internet too. Email is even more widely spread than the internet, with many people having access to it

such as "brochure@mycompany.com" which will automatically return an electronic brochure in response to enquiries. Email can also be used — carefully — as a means of promoting your company or encouraging people to visit the web site. Many shops that sell online, for instance,

allow you to register and receive notification of special offers. Don't confuse this type of marketing with the spam, or unsolicited

The time spent creating an impartial and up-to-date guide to a relevant topic **COULD WELL PAY DIVIDENDS if it allows you to persuade magazines to feature your pages**

that can't see your web pages. A fast response to email enquiries can help keep customers happy or remove pressure from the front desk. And with the right services from an internet provider, you don't need to dial up every hour to check for new mail. Companies like Direct Connection, for instance, provide a range of services, including auto-responders, so that you can have an address

commercial email. Sending blanket messages to every email address that you can find will quickly alienate potential customers, and may even result in your Internet Service Provider cutting you off.

Using email can be positive. You can keep people up to date with new products, changes to your web site, special offers or important information, and again some ISPs will be able to run a mailing list on their servers for you, saving you from doing much of the work. There are even some packages available for the PC now that will do the equivalent of a personalised letter via email too. If you go down this route, though, it's important to strike the right balance. Sending out a message every time a minor change is made to your web site will annoy people pretty quickly, and they'll simply ask to be removed. It's far better to send out useful information occasionally rather than bombard people with small snippets. Bear in mind, too, the comments in the "Essential Advice" box on page 135. Simply because someone puts an email address on their business card, or sends you a message, doesn't mean that they're happy to have marketing material sent to the same address.

Forward planning

If you want people to access your business via the internet, it needs to be simple to do and easy to find. Planning is essential: from choosing a provider who can offer the facilities you need, to working out a web site and how people will contact other people through that site. For example, what are the main things your company does? Do you want a general email address for all enquiries, like <mailto:info@yourcompany>, or would it make more sense to have an email address for each product? Key departments, such as sales, support and accounts, may need their own address, to make it simple for everyone to get in touch if they don't know the name of the person that they need to speak to.

Similarly, your web site needs to be thought out, and registering a domain name is vital to creating the right impression. A memorable

THE PROFESSIONAL'S VIEW

Marketing isn't just something you can do in your spare time if you want to make it right. Often, it will be much more effective to hand web-site marketing over to the professionals; but what would they do? PCW talked to Jason Finch, a director of port80, an internet consultancy www.port80.com, and asked how they'd go about marketing a web site. One of the most important rules, according to port80, is also one of the most basic — "Get your web address everywhere your phone number appears, and make it big."

Banner advertising may be big business, but it's also far from proven, and Finch believes there are still problems with it, though port80 will



liaise with the main agencies if clients want to promote a site in that way. But auditing remains a problem, according to Finch. "The market is still skewed against the advertiser. The auditing isn't really good enough."

It's a point port80 has set out to prove, running simple scripts that will repeatedly select a link on a site, causing havoc with simplistic logging. And it's easy to see the potential problems this could have when you're paying simply for the number of times your ad is delivered to a browser. For some sites, the company

recommends trying to attract general publicity by including non-commercial information.

"For instance," says Finch, "if you're in the business of selling train sets, you'll probably get more hits if you include general information about model trains and tracks, instead of just having a wholly commercial site."

Ultimately, every client is different. For some, it may be more effective to place an ad in an appropriate magazine, rather than pay for a limited number of impressions on a web site. Good publicity might work better than both, while others really will work best online, whether by banner ads, or by ensuring entry in the most popular search engines.

address will help bring people to the site — unlike the www.provider.net/-mycompany type of address you'll find with some free web space. Think how people will want to use the information on your site; is it just a simple page, or an online catalogue? Might it make sense for people to be able to go straight to key areas, like www.yourcompany.com/support/? Look at how other, similar companies have organised their sites, and see what's worth doing, or avoiding.

If you view the web site as an important means of contacting your customers, make sure it works properly; you should consider contacting a few clients you know well and

asking them what they'd like to see, or soliciting feedback, before you tell everyone about the new site. There's nothing quite as unimpressive as a page with fancy logos where every link says, "Please visit again; we're working on this site."

Making the most of your site

When everything's ready, it's time to start promoting your web site. The first stage is to make sure it appears in search engines. You can wait for them to find it, or you can register it yourself; systems such as www.submit-it.com will help make sure you're listed in all the popular engines, for a price. Remember to make sure the index page of your site includes keyword and description tags in the HTML to ensure that people can search for it easily. Link exchanges will help create traffic too, and you may find companies you do business with are willing to link to your site in return for a reciprocal link; this is an area where the effort of including general, non-commercial information on your site can really pay off.

When you print new stationery, make sure your electronic contact information is included prominently, too. And if the web site is intended to answer lots of common questions, consider a special, one-off batch of printed material, with more prominence given to web and email addresses, before routinely quoting it next to phone and fax contact details.

Depending on the type of information your site features, you may be able to attract other interest. The time spent creating an impartial and up-to-date guide to a relevant topic could well pay dividends if it allows you to persuade magazines or newspapers to feature your pages.

To really drive up the number of visitors to a web site, advertising may be the way to go. You can pay for your advert to appear when people search for specific keywords in some web indices, or simply to have a banner on selected sites. Online advertising of this type can be effective, but it will take skill to come up with a compelling and informative advert that appears less than an inch high on most computer screens. If it works, you'll see the hit rate of your site clock up, as people can go directly from advert to site in a matter of seconds.

But the key is information, information, information. Money spent encouraging people to visit your web site through adverts, whether they're printed in a magazine or on the front page of AltaVista, is money down the drain if it doesn't help your business. Before you spend time and money on advertising your site, think about just what it is you're really promoting. A web site, or a business? There's a world of difference.

ONLINE ADVERTISING — THE BARE FACTS

Surf the web, and you can't miss them.

Banner ads at the top of pages, inviting you to find out about the latest IBM Thinkpad or a new Peugeot car. Click on them, and you'll be taken to the advertiser's site for more information. While some sites sell ads themselves, many are now sold through agencies, so if you want to spread the word about your company, you don't have to contact every site you want to advertise on. Instead, approach an agency, and they'll handle everything for you. You can even upload your ad from a browser when it's changed.

➔ **Payment** for the ads works in a number of different ways. The most common is paying per "page impression": that's a fancy way of saying a whole page delivered to a browser. Visit the front page of a site, and that's one

impression. Visit the next page, and that's another. Hit Reload on your browser, and you could well be up to three.

➔ **A typical cost** for a targeted banner ad is around £25 per thousand page impressions, so if you want your ad seen 200,000 times, you'll pay £5,000. With some services, you simply say what type of sites you want the ad to appear on, and when it's been flashed up the appropriate number of times, it disappears.

Compared with a single-page advert in a publication, which could cost you under £3,000, this may not seem such a good deal.

➔ **An alternative** is the "click through" charge, where your ad will appear on a page, but you'll only pay — around £1 — for each person that clicks on it to visit your site. A refinement of this, called "pay per action", leaves you

paying nothing for casual browsers, but a much heftier fee for those people who visit your site and do something concrete, like buying a product or filling in a form. Fees for that kind of service could be as much as £150. Is it worth it? That's a hard question to answer, and you'll have to do your homework very carefully before taking the plunge. The prices we've quoted are from typical rate cards; with some experts believing that up to 85% of the online advertising capacity in the UK remains unsold, you might be able to strike a better deal.

● **For more information:** www.tmsni.com A UK-focused sales agency. www.doubleclick.net Global and regional internet advertising. www.bannerads.org For a different view of the business.