

Understanding Today's Internet Marketing

Developing a book on Internet Marketing is a tricky prospect. There are so many “flavors” of internet marketing, and this is no exception. The purpose of this chapter is really to introduce you to the flavor of the rest of the book, the overarching theme that will resonate throughout each chapter. That is, everything starts based on your business goals, all of the “parts” of online marketing are interdependent, and everything must be measured in order to have a complete view.

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A Holistic Approach

Marketing is evolving at lightning speed with website design and usability advances, search engine optimization, and pay-per-click marketing techniques, website analytics, and social media initiatives all competing for a busy marketer's attention. But one important core principle remains constant: the need for an integrated approach. In this chapter, you'll learn the core tenets of a successful, coordinated, integrated approach that involves not just marketers but your whole organization.

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The Fundamentals of Marketing

Marketing online doesn't start or end with search engine rankings. It isn't solely dependent upon how well your website is built. It certainly doesn't depend on how beautiful your website may be. It is a combination of many factors that not only work together but depend on each other in order to provide your company with more visibility online, better customer experiences, and an understanding of proper visitor measurement.

Therefore, the principles outlined in this book are not simply based on a single activity. A single focus, such as search engine optimization, is effective only when paired with additional disciplines. Effective search engine optimization requires analytics, which shows the effectiveness of the optimization, the return on investment, and necessary adjustments to the keyword strategy. Another paired discipline is usability, which tests and analyzes to see whether your website visitors are seeing what they expect and are taking the actions you desire.

Simply put,

- Make it right the first time.
- Search engine optimization, social media channels, and pay-per-click marketing help people find you.
- Content makes people stay and gives them a reason to return.
- Usability ensures that your message and visitor tasks are clear.
- Analytics tells you what just happened.
- The combination of analytics, usability, and testing will tell you *why*.

So, although there are thousands of books explaining search engine optimization, analytics, website design, and hundreds of other marketing-related subjects, this book is intended to show how each discipline must work together to create a specific strategy. I call that strategy (strangely enough) *marketing*.

Marketing is the underlying force of this entire book. This is reflected in the rest of this chapter, because the foundation of your website marketing strategy is the key to building a successful presence online.

My definition of marketing, which is based on the classic definition of direct marketing, is this:

Giving the right people the right message with the right offer at the right time

I like the direct marketing definition, because that is the closest to what we are attempting to do online. Much of online marketing is rooted in 100 or so years of the direct marketing industry. The most compelling factor in online marketing is the ability to measure the effectiveness of this definition. In addition, there are many different methods, or *channels*, with which to use this formula.

What I love about this foundation is that the level of metrics employed by direct marketers would make some website managers cringe. There is a science in persuasion, and understanding that science can help you market your website far beyond getting high rankings in a search engine or two.

The Measure of Success

I learned this lesson in the early days of the Internet. I was in selling real estate at the time and specialized in commercial hospitality properties, such as bed and breakfasts and inns. I started building websites in order to get beyond the local marketing in the newspaper and Multiple Listing Service (MLS) database. The only other option was taking out full-page color ads in magazines, which was a very costly proposition.

At the end of a very profitable year, I reviewed the performance of the website to see where I should invest my time and efforts in the next year. In that review, I found a concept that would change my life.

I averaged about 40 leads a month from visitors who found the website via search engines. I learned to rank well very early and applied these practices to rank for hundreds of terms in the search engines. Search engines provided about 80 percent of the traffic to my website and hundreds of subscribers to my content. However, I did not make a single sale from those thousands of visitors. They were nice, big numbers—impressive but ineffective and unprofitable.

My sales were all traced back to a single advertising link that I had purchased. That link was an advertisement for my website on a bed-and-breakfast website directory. I purchased that link for \$35 a year. A small investment yielded a thousandfold return.

The lesson was reinforced as I learned to apply more marketing principles toward this new online channel. The right message in the right place to the right person can be more effective than high rankings, high visitor counts, and a great conversion rate:

What counts, more than anything, is profit.

Make It Right

One of my favorite shows to watch has been the Home & Garden Television channel's *Holmes on Homes*. Mike Holmes is a contractor who fixes the additions, repairs, and incompetent work of other contractors. In doing so, he educates the homeowner and the viewer and advocates for better consumer rights against poor contractor workmanship.

I am inspired by this show, because it mirrors my job in the online world, even to the point where I use many of the catchphrases of Holmes in my everyday work of evaluating and fixing websites:

- “Make it right.”
- “Get it right the first time.”

- “Rip it all out.”
- “Gut it; start over.”
- “Bring in the right people for the right job.”

When evaluating how websites were programmed and built, it became apparent that so many were not built with marketing in mind. The misunderstanding of what *search friendly* meant and how it was interpreted made for a mess of code that never helped the companies that paid thousands of dollars for a website.

Unfortunately, and unlike the home improvement industry, there is no licensing body overseeing website development and marketing. If someone builds a bad website, there is no way to recover, much less a decision-making authority that can judge a bad website.

As Holmes has preached, the best way to protect yourself from a bad investment is to educate yourself and learn all the questions that you should ask. This book is designed to help you do the very same thing: prepare you to ask the right questions and have the right information with which to make better and more informed decisions about your website and marketing strategy.

Who’s at Fault for Website Problems?

Now, don’t get it in your head that website problems are the fault of the development agency or the programmer. No, the majority of problems can be reduced to a single problem: communication.

I find that the relationship between a company and its website developers becomes tenuous very quickly, and after being in the industry since the near beginning, I think I understand why.

Clients, or the “website buyers,” need a website. The problem is that they don’t know what to ask for or how to ask for it. Beyond something that “looks nice” or goals that focus on the visual, there is usually very little understanding of what creates a successful presence for a company online. Therefore, the developers do what they think is best. They fill in the gaps with what they know, and if the client doesn’t ask for it, it doesn’t get done. Programmers need specific instructions, and clients usually aren’t in the position to understand, much less provide those instructions.

Two companies are trying to collaborate to produce something, but they are speaking two different languages. The scope of the project grows, the development company puts in more and more hours than budgeted, and the clients grow more and more dissatisfied because they want something but cannot communicate what exactly they want.

When the website is delivered, the development company tends to see it as “done” and moves on to the next project. Meanwhile, the customer already has a list of things they want to change. Many website developers and development companies see websites as a project that has a completion date. To companies that use their website to conduct

business, the website is never done. So, not only is the language different between these companies, but the expectations and goals are completely different as well.

Bringing It All Together with Analytics

I cannot understand why there are so many businesses that do not use analytics. Analytics is the key to most of what you need to know in order to make intelligent decisions about your website in terms of marketing, search engine optimization, social media, and pay-per-click advertising. Even design changes can be improved and measured by simply using your analytics.

Without analytics, you cannot put dollar signs in front of improvements. You can't know for sure whether that new design works better or worse. You won't be able to tell whether that new copywriter is connecting to the audience. All of these questions that are vital to determining profitability are founded in the proper applications of analytics.

When you bring it all together, here's what I have found:

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) SEO yields a drastic improvement based on the desired metrics. For websites measuring pure visitor numbers, the number can be exceedingly high in bringing “eyeballs” to the site. For ecommerce and lead-generation sites, I have witnessed increases in conversion rates between 200 percent and 400 percent, because not only does SEO increase the number of visitors, but it also increases the quality of visitors, resulting in better visitors who need what you may have. The big difference in numbers depends basically on how old the website is, on whether SEO has ever been performed, and on your desired metrics (visitors, contacts, conversions, and so on)—there are a large number of dependent factors.

Design Improvements (Usability) Once you get people to the website, the next goal is to get them to do what you want them to do. Unfortunately, there are usually design obstacles, content issues, or unclear steps in the process. The process of improving the visitor's path through the website is called *usability*.

Usability transforms a website from the corporate vision of what it should be to the user's vision of what they need. By changing the information, graphics, and organization of a website to meet the needs of the user, the ability of the website to gain new customers and retain old ones will increase dramatically. Jacob Neilson, a usability guru, estimated that the average website can experience an 83 percent to 135 percent improvement in metrics, though he has seen improvements far beyond that. (See Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox from January 22, 2008: www.useit.com/alertbox/roi.html.)

Analytics Analytics tells you what happened and why. A survey of Forrester Research's Web Analytics Peer Research Panel showed the companies that hired a full-time analyst experienced a 900 percent to 1200 percent return on their investment. From my experience, that can happen well within the first year of an analyst working on a website, because they find many of the largest issues first.

Without analytics, you cannot put dollar signs in front of improvements. You can't know for sure whether that new design works better or worse. Essentially, of all the tools in your online-marketing kit, analytics is the toolbox. Without the toolbox, you cannot carry all the tools you need, and you can't justify adding more. It's a poor analogy, but I hope you get my meaning.

A Team Approach

A single method of marketing online will not survive. I work with many teams of people who approach projects from various disciplines, but all have to work together to be successful. That means a corporate website will never reach its full potential unless marketing and IT can kiss, make up, and get along in order to develop dynamic solutions that will enable a company to lead the market. Until these departments get along, the website will always suffer.

I have lost count of the companies where I have consulted on their websites only to find that the marketing department blames the IT department for the failures of the website. IT blames marketing for having unrealistic goals. The sales force is simply dismissed as not having relevant information, and those who actually work on the product or have customer interaction have very little to do with the decision making.

It's a common theme to be working with a company and seeing all the finger-pointing, only to realize that no one in the meeting has ever tried to purchase a product from the company's website. That, my friend, is a marketing problem, not an IT function. IT's job is to make sure the website is up and it functions as specified. If people can't figure out how to get to the next step in the site, that's a marketing problem.

Businesses need to build an integrated approach to marketing the website and assigning roles based on an understanding of the disciplines needed. The beauty of a holistic approach is the understanding that everything can be measured. If there is a disagreement, then great! Make two versions, and test to see which one is most effective. There are no more assumptions on how the user will react, because the tools are available to get the user's opinion, not someone's assumption.

Is This for You?

This is why I subscribe to a holistic approach. Building a successful business online is more than chasing the latest social-media site, more than a number-one ranking in Google, and more than a fancy new website.

Building a successful website is about strategic planning, understanding your market, and concentrating on a specific message. When you know your message, how you spread it will be easy.

This book is intended as a guide for marketing managers who are struggling to "do it all" and keep on top of the latest information. As such, this is also intended for

small-business owners who are expected to figure out how to run a website rather than run their business. I hope that it answers questions that you didn't know to ask.

I find in my consulting practice that even after nearly 15 years of Internet marketing and building websites there is still a lot of myth, skepticism, misunderstanding, and flat-out crappy advice in circulation. The best defense is common sense. The best answers in this industry tend to have a lot of common sense. If something doesn't sound right, then chances are it isn't.

So, this is our road map to the next few weeks of going through this text in an hour a day. I will focus first on understanding how search engines work and then on understanding how searchers work. In later chapters, more technical issues will be covered, because even the best targeting and optimization won't overcome technical problems.

