



Five Questions to Answer Before You Build Your Website

It is not just a website. It is where the bricks-and-mortar world meets the clicks-and-mortar world, and your website has an impact on your company's image. Because your online market presence is viewed by individual-defined norms, you must ensure the site meets the expectations of your site visitors. In fact, a visit to your site must not only meet the visitor's needs, but also delight her to promote subsequent returns. After all, what good is your site if you only get someone to stop by once and never return again? Although there are many different objectives and strategies for various websites, one fundamental objective is to have visitors bookmark the site and return again and again.

So how can you satisfy your visitors' needs and increase the frequency of visits from the same visitors? There is no magic formula or secret java scripting that will do it. However, laying the foundation of your site by answering five basic questions prior to building your site will allow you to develop an online presence that meets your business goals and encourages visitors to return to your site time after time. The five questions to be answered are: 1) Who is your target audience, 2) What are the objectives of your website, 3) What does a visitor expect from your site, 4) What do you want the visitor to leave with, and 5) Why should a visitor return to your site?

Defining the Target Audience

The web gives people access to, and control of, information at their convenience. Knowing who your target audience is a crucial step that needs to be clearly defined prior to developing site content or design. By knowing who your audience is you can answer the five questions that lay the foundation for your website with greater accuracy. In fact, the better you know who your audience is and what they expect to get from a visit to your site, the more relevant you can make your site.

Many websites are designed to cater to the needs of a nondescript mass audience. Take a quick look at most websites and you will find the standard out-of-the-box website package with six pages – including “Who we are,” “What we do,” and “Our favorite links.” In order to satisfy the dramatically different needs of a wide variety of people, web developers create a generic site that provides no real value for the visitor or the company. The visitor does not find relevant information, and decides that the website is not adequate for his needs. No bookmarks are made and the visitor never returns. The company (site owner) gets some level of activity as measured by hits and page views, but never builds any loyalty to the site so nearly all visitors are first-time, last-time surfers.

Who is your target audience?

Defining the target audience and their needs is an important first step in building your website and a critical element to increasing the loyalty on your site. Who are the people that will use your website? Engineers that require technical data or students looking for specific information for a term paper project? How do they like to receive and use the information they collect on the Internet? Is the visual impact more important or less important to effectively delivering your message? How can your site help satisfy the needs of your target audience? You can see that knowing your target audience is much more than figuring out the demographics like gender, age, education level and income. Knowing your audience is the only true way to provide relevant content the way your audience wants to receive it. Define your target audience and get to know them better than your competitors. After all, the only sustainable competitive advantage is the understanding you have of your customers that your competitors do not have.

What are the objectives of your website?

Is it already obvious to you why you need a website? For many companies it is not so much a clear strategy as it is wanting to keep up with the Jones'. "Our biggest competitor has a website and we don't want to seem like they can do something we can't." If this is your reasoning for embarking on an e-commerce initiative, you need to take a step back and consider what a website could offer your customers that is of true value – rather than to forge ahead with no direction.

There are many reasons for building an online presence that compliments or enhances your existing offline presence. For many companies, the primary justification for launching a website is because everybody else has one. Although this thinking is somewhat myopic and inward looking, because everyone else does have a website may mean that without a web presence your company is led out to pasture in the future.

One of the most basic reasons for building an online presence is that a website serves as one more tool for communicating with your internal and external audiences cost-effectively and conveniently. Cost-effective in the sense that the Internet has allowed small, capital-limited businesses the chance to look a lot bigger than they really are – opening the door to an expanded marketplace. Small businesses are no longer restricted by their location and ability to touch the customer personally. Now, with an online presence that delivers targeted communications you can drive in traffic and connect with customers that would have been cost-prohibitive to reach using traditional marketing tools.

There are many reasons why your company should have a presence on the web. However, the only ones that matter are those that are customer-focused. This alternative channel of communication saves time for the visitor and permits her to access the information at her convenience. It also provides the ability for your company to capture information on your site visitors to build customer profiles and better serve your customers.

What does a visitor expect from your site?

If you have already developed a visceral understanding of your target audience, realizing the expectations of your site visitors becomes second nature. However, it is important to take the customer's perspective to adequately define what your visitors expect from your site. Most Internet users will expect ease-of-use (referring to the navigation ease) of your site as well as relevant information that makes their lives easier. These expectations go hand-in-hand with the assumption that your site will download quickly. The average Internet user will wait no more than eight seconds before jumping to another page or stopping the transmission if the page is too slow to open.

Beyond this, depending on your business and target audience, some users will want to be entertained and be dissatisfied if the entertainment value does not meet their expectations. Others will look for ordering information, pre-sales services, and company information. The expectations will vary from person to person, but if you have defined your target audience into the smallest homogenous segment possible (with the goal of a market segment of one), you will be able to meet your visitors' expectations in both content and design of your website.

What do you want the visitor to leave with?

Once you have a solid understanding of what your site visitors expect from your site, you need to determine what it is that you want the visitor to leave with after visiting your website. Are you attempting to reduce the sales cycle time and want to ensure that your customer's questions about your product's performance and specifications are answered? Or are you looking to improve your brand image and need to find ways to enhance your offline brand online? Depending on your goals, you will want to develop different strategies for different goals.

Ask yourself what it is that you want your visitors to leave with and then consider whether you can address those needs with a focus on content or on design of the site. Most likely you will want to provide a combination of rich content that helps satisfy customer needs complemented by a good website design that allows the user to find the information or conduct the transaction quickly and easily.

Why should someone return to your site?

Is there any good reason that a visitor should bookmark your site so that he will return again? If not, what needs to be improved within your site plan that will encourage repeat visits? Although this question is last in this article, it is equally important to targeting the right audience. Whatever the objectives and reasons are for creating an online presence for your company, if you are not driving people back to your site, your website efforts are in vain. After all, why spend the time and money on developing a site if its only purpose is to keep your competition up to speed on what you are doing and how you market your business?

By asking yourself, "Why should someone return to my site?" you are forcing yourself to take a hard look at your website initiative and the justification for the investment. Developing loyalty from your customers through your online activities will be seen in

your offline revenues and profits. Providing relevant information, making it easier for your customer to do her job, and creating a compelling site are some basic tactics that will encourage people to return to your website. Determining what it is that is of value to your target audience will be the cornerstone of your web activities.

Five Questions, Five Answers

There are many excellent books, magazines, and e-zines available that describe in great detail the points presented in this article. However, for those of you who are considering building a website, the questions posed here will help to layout the roadmap for your site. Laying the foundation of your site by answering these five basic questions prior to building your site will allow you to develop an online presence that meets your business goals and encourages visitors to return to your site. The key to getting off on the right foot is to complete your homework prior to launching your web initiatives. Because the Internet is in a constant state of change, those of you who have already created your site can easily take a step back and apply these five areas to your existing site strategy to ensure a solid foundation that meets your customers' expectations.