The New Webmaster:
From Technician to Strategist

Diana Lomont

Portland State University

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The term "webmaster" has been around for almost as long as the World Wide Web itself. But as the Internet has grown in breadth and sophistication, so has the need for expanded job descriptions for those who manage websites.

In the early days of the Internet, the role of "webmaster" – a take-off on the term "postmaster" – encompassed all aspects of planning, coding, production and user interface, according to Wikipedia. A broader definition of webmaster, says Wikipedia, is "a businessperson who uses online media to sell products and/or services." This broader definition covers "not just technical aspects of overseeing Web site construction and maintenance but also management of content, advertising, marketing and order fulfillment."[1]

The larger role of webmaster as internet strategist has gained recognition to the point of a professional association forming to promote awareness of this new-media profession. A mission of the Internet Strategy Form (IFS), based in Portland, OR, is to support the role of senior Internet decision-makers at medium to large organizations through research, professional development, peer networking and thought leadership. IFS Founder Steve Gehlen prefers to not even use the term "webmaster" anymore.

An IFS survey of in-house corporate Internet strategists last year revealed an emerging role of Internet strategist as a hybrid of marketing and IT disciplines. The study showed that the majority of Internet strategists have a professional background in either traditional marketing (31 percent) or traditional IT (29 percent). The majority of companies still drive Internet strategy out of the marketing department (58 percent) while only 4 percent of IT leadership is driving Internet strategy, down from 7 percent in 2005. In addition, 20 percent of companies have a stand-alone department that drives Internet strategy, an emerging trend according to IFS.[2]

Clearly, there is a case for companies to make Internet strategy and website management a business priority. A poll conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project shows that Internet penetration has reached 73 percent for American adults, up from 66 percent in January 2005.[3] In a survey of top marketing executives by WebTrends, more than half (56 percent) see the Web as the center of their marketing strategy either currently or within the next year.[4]

So what does it take to be an effective web strategist? The short answer to that question is a combination of effectively implemented marketing, design, usability and technology strategies that attract and secure customers. The longer answer is what this paper will detail – from marketing tactics to proven usability principles and important technology considerations.

Website as Marketing Hub

It is projected that by 2012, 43 percent of all retail sales will be influenced by or made on the Internet.[5] With so many consumers using the Internet as a source of information, shopping, product comparison and buying, any business today that wants to be taken seriously needs to have a website. Creating a website has become easier and faster with the proliferation of professional web designers as well as do-it-yourself templates. Slap up your company logo, list your products, add some pictures and a shopping cart and you're ready to go. Yes, it's easy to get a website up to sell products, but with all that teeming online competition, it requires a lot more art and science today to be a successful online marketer.

Landing Page Optimization

In the world of professional marketing, website optimization of e-commerce sites has become a specialization of its own with marketers methodically testing and proving what works and what doesn't. To optimize a website for successful e-commerce starts with an understanding of users visiting a site. Tim Ash, author of *Landing Page Optimization: The Definitive Guide to Testing and Tuning for Conversions*, spells out four main types of users based on where they are in the buying process: browsers, evaluators, transactors, and customers. At the customer stage, the business goal is to sustain the consumer's satisfaction until their next transaction.[6]

Flint McGlaughlin, director of optimization research with MarketingExperiments – an organization that tests and teaches effective e-commerce strategies – divides online consumers into "browsers" and "hunters". Browsers may have ideas about making a purchase but need more convincing or are simply window-shopping. Hunters already know what they want and are looking for the quickest, easiest and safest way to make their purchase.

Although their labeling of online shoppers may be somewhat different, Ash and McGlaughlin do offer a lot of similar guidance on how to attract and secure online customers.

A well-produced e-commerce website must answer the following questions immediately from the user's point-of-view:

- Do you have what I want?
- Why should I buy here instead of from a competitor?
- What incentive are you offering me to buy right now?
- Is it safe to buy from this site?
- Can I trust you?

MarketingExperiments has developed a complex formula for converting web browsers to web buyers. Basically, the goal is for a website to provide enough motivation, along with emotional and technical security, for a consumer to complete the buying process. This involves a site providing the right buying incentives while alleviating any consumer anxiety, which could involve communicating counterarguments to objections as well as offering a trusted brand name, a good warranty and return policy, and dependable customer service. However, for any of this to be effective, the site must first communicate a strong value proposition with product differentiation. Overall, one can think of a website as taking the place of a salesperson with all the right messages and tools to close the sale.

When not making a sale, an important function of e-commerce sites today is gathering potential customer contact information. In this regard, a web strategist should make use of a website as a customer relationship management tool. Effective incentives – whether in the form of white papers, contest entries or product demos – can be used to gather customer information and preferences. A marketing strategy can then stratify customers to receive targeted messages based on their personal preferences. The web strategist can deploy e-mail marketing campaigns to drive potential customers to the website where an offer resides for actionable response. An ongoing online dialogue with consumers can include newsletters, free webinars, advertisement of new products, as well as communication of special events, new website features and services. An online marketing strategy directed at "conversion optimization" – successfully turning users into customers or sales leads – results in a median conversion rate of 40 percent to 60 percent, according to Lance Loveday and Sandra Neihaus, the authors of *Web Design for ROI*.[7]

Deployment of Web 2.0 Technologies

Incorporation of Web 2.0 technologies allowing social networking and other user-generated content should also be explored, if appropriate for the audience. According to a JupiterResearch report, "Social Networking Sites: Defining Advertising Opportunities in a Competitive Landscape, 30 percent of frequent social networkers trust their peers' opinions when making a major purchase decision, but only 10 percent trust an advertisement.[8] A casual observer of all this social networking hype may feel it's all just an overrated trend. The numbers, however, indicate that for younger consumers, social networking is becoming a regular lifestyle. A 2008 campaign survey by Pew's Research Center for People and the Press found that 22 percent of Americans use social networking sites. Of that number, 67 percent are age 18-29, 21 percent are age 30-39, and only 6 percent are 40 or older.[9] Some online marketers predict that by the time the MySpace and Facebook generation enters the workforce, online social networking will be a normal part of the fabric of business.

Many marketers are taking note and acting. According to JupiterResearch, in 2007, as many as 48 percent of brand marketers deployed marketing on social networking channels, up from 38 percent in 2006.[10]

Some of the ways businesses can make use of Web 2.0 technologies to connect with their customers include:

- Hosting online conferences or "webinars" that allow questions to be submitted by attendees
- Creating an online social network of event attendees to enable professionals to remain connected and continue to share knowledge and support with one another
- Sponsoring or hosting blogs and wikis that enable knowledge-sharing between business experts and customers
- Gathering customer input through online surveys about user needs, interests and preferences, and
- Creating the infrastructure for online communities for customers to share information, connections and resources.

The Many Aspects of Usability

"Usability" can be a difficult concept to pin down. Five different people may have five different ideas on how to make a form user-friendly. The job of a technical writer or webmaster, however, is to implement usability improvements which a general majority of users will appreciate. Logic, efficiency of use, ease of interaction, and adherence to familiar standards and conventions should be the guiding directives when implementing usability.

In website management there are many elements of usability to consider: navigation, page design, content organization, language, form design, treatment of links, PDFs, interactive components, etc.

Designing for the User

Once a web strategist has identified the objectives of a website, designing the site for the user should be the first priority. Sites may be organized by product category, by major topic of interest, by user type (e.g., business vs. consumer), or by functionality (databases and applications), along with expected home page links such as About Us, Contact Us, Press Room, and Publications.

A good web strategist will balance the organization's goals with user needs and interests. Of course, providing content for the user offers its own reward by drawing the user into the site and hopefully back for return visits.

Site optimization to achieve website objectives provides further design clarification. This involves placing more design emphasis on leading objectives. For example, if a website's goal is to have users download a new software demo, a promotion for such on the home page should prominently draw the user's eye. Website experts at MarketingExperiments, part of the MECLABS Sciences Group, have proven that linking "design weight" to objectives works. They have also proven that design simplification pays off. Many of their tests have shown that redesigning a page with two columns instead of three more effectively directs the user to a given objective, instead of the user being distracted by too many page elements. "Simplicity of design is probably the single most important factor for sale conversion," according to Flint McGlaughlin of MarketingExperiments.[11]

Designing efficient navigation paths that meet the user's goals is also critical for effective web marketing. In addition to home page navigation, this should involve an understanding of user navigation paths wherever users may enter the site. Website analytics can inform web strategists of keywords and sources of entry so that landing pages can be designed to address user needs and motivations. "The highest performing landing pages are those that match exactly the motivation of the customer," says McGlaughlin. So, if users are landing on an inside page from a Google search, the page should include content to address their interests and appropriate links to let them navigate efficiently from there.

Providing Effective Content

Working hand-in-hand with good design must be good content for a website to be successful. In his book, *Prioritizing Web Usability*, author Jakob Nielsen urges his readers to value the role writing plays in web usability. "Don't underestimate the role of effective writing in creating a successful website," he says, advising website managers to employ the skills of professional copywriters.[12]

Good writing for websites means concise writing that is formatted for readability with short paragraphs, headers and bullets to enable scanning of pages. After all, the average web user spends an average of only 90 seconds per inside page.[13]

According to Nielsen, a general rule of thumb is that one should write one-quarter to one-half as much for the web as one would for print. More detailed information can be provided in attachments such as reports.

Effective content starts with understanding and writing for one's audience. Depending on the nature of the website, audience characteristics to consider when writing content include user interests, age, cultural background, education, level of technical expertise, vocation – and most importantly – motivation for coming to a website.

According to MarketingExperiments, matching content to user motivation should be the most important goal of a website.

"The highest performing landing pages are those that match exactly the motivation of the customer. After motivation, the clarity with which you express the value proposition is the most important factor in determining whether a customer buys from you or not."[14]

When it comes to the individual content elements on a page, MarketingExperiments has proven that the headline is the most important factor. A good headline will clearly communicate the value proposition and draw the user in to read more.

Another important consideration is that good content depends on good design and appropriate placement. Helpful information does a user no good if it's buried in a site without a clear navigational path to it. At the same time, each page should only contain as much content that is necessary and appropriate for the page. Credit card processing information should be left to appear on a site's checkout page and not clutter the bottom of the home page.

Finally, content can be made more user-friendly through thoughtful technical treatment, such as linking help contents through keywords in the body of text to serve a user's train of thought, and formatting PDF documents with linked bookmarks or a table of contents to facilitate navigation.

Other Considerations

Being a successful web strategist includes many aspects of site management. Coordination with a website's information technology (IT) team is essential for ensuring sound site security. With identity theft on the rise, consumers need assurance that a site can be trusted to protect their personal information. Industry professionals recommend that e-commerce organizations develop and follow their own privacy policies that reflect the data-handling practices of their respective websites.

According to TRUSTe, an organization founded by the Electronic Frontier Foundation that helps businesses communicate their commitment to privacy, the Federal Trade Commission's Fair Information Practices are the closest thing the industry has to an online standard for privacy practices. The Fair Information Practices cover these points and principles:

- **Notice**. Web sites should provide full disclosure of what personal information is collected and how it is used.
- **Choice**. Consumers at a website should be given choice about how their personal information is used.

- **Access**. Once consumers have disclosed personal information, they should have access to it.
- **Security.** Personal information disclosed to websites should be secured to ensure the information stays private.
- **Redress.** Consumers should have a way to resolve problems that may arise regarding sites' use and disclosure of their personal information.

A privacy policy and statement will help a consumer feel secure in making purchases on a website. Good website management, however, must ensure that the entire customer experience works successfully. A study by MarketingSherpa found that the average shopping cart abandonment rate across all industries in the U.S. is approximately 60 percent.[15] Technical reasons why website transactions are abandoned most often involve credit card processing and user name/password issues. An effective online strategy must include website analytic tracking to pinpoint and address any technical obstacles. Organizations that capture users' email addresses and phone numbers can contact them to follow up on unsuccessful transactions.

Finally, an effective web strategist needs to keep up with new and emerging technologies, especially those that involve user communication. More and more cell phones are being made with web interfaces, requiring specific web page formatting to accommodate the small phone screens. As more consumers get accustomed to surfing the web with their smart phones, Blackberries and iPhones, websites that are accessible in a small-screen format will get better play.

Conclusion

To be a "webmaster" today means more than managing the technical aspects of keeping a website up and running. With so many companies realizing the growing role of online commerce in their bottom line, today's webmaster must really be a web strategist. Good website strategy involves combining effective design, navigation, relevant content and usability in ways that fulfill user and business goals.

From a technical writing point-of-view, websites offer many opportunities for professional communicators to apply technical and language skills – from organizing content in a reader-friendly, scannable manner to providing convenient linkage of content.

Professional communicators working on websites can also expand their value to a business by understanding and applying website optimization principles. According to MarketingExperiments, optimizing a website provides the most readily available return on investment, and should be the top business priority after product optimization. Effective website optimization – blending design, marketing and usability principles – serves not only businesses but consumers, too. If a website can clearly articulate its value and content, users can expediently get what they want or move on.

Today's profession as a web strategist calls for a stimulating mix of skills in marketing, communication, design, usability, customer service and technical proficiency. From my own experience as a Web Communications Coordinator at the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, it also calls for skills in project management, team facilitation and diplomacy. I was glad to discover the Internet Strategist Forum – the professional association that is working to advance professional recognition of the web strategist role – and the value smart internet strategy can bring to organizations. I'm excited to pursue this dynamic career path which calls for what I find to be a fulfilling mix of knowledge and skills.

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