

Developing Leads from Your Website

Using Your Site to Market to Your Best Prospects

A White Paper from Site ROI
Better Results from Your Website
770-978-3079

<http://www.siteroi.com>

October, 2002

Copyright © 2002, Site ROI. All Rights Reserved.

Overview

What is the purpose of your company's website? For some companies, it's a way to sell products, complete with a shopping cart application. For others, it's place to find out about the company's products or services – a 24-hour virtual brochure. Still others hope that their website will be a source of new leads for their sales force to follow up on.

A website should be all of the above, and more. Your website can act as a source of new leads or as a way to follow up with the leads that you have already generated, either on the website or from other sources. By designing appropriate marketing campaigns, and by creating the infrastructure to support lead generation and retention, you can improve the ROI of your website.

This white paper illustrates some of the best practices for making sure your website is designed to collect as many leads as possible from some of your best prospects – people who have searched for more information on your company, product, or service on the Internet, and have clicked through to find out more.

In addition, this paper illustrates some of the techniques you can use to keep your name in front of each of your prospects on a regular basis, so that when they are ready to make a purchase, you will be in a prime position to make the sale.

Before you can use your website to collect leads, you have to make sure that your prospects can find you on the Internet. You should have a site that is accessible by search engine spiders, and that has been optimized so that your site ranks highly in the search engines for the search terms prospects are using to find you.

Making Your Website Prospect Friendly

Your goal should be to have as many visitors to your website register as possible, so you know who they are, and can contact them again about your company's products or services. One of the first steps you should take is to make it as easy as possible for visitors to your site to register.

It may seem hard to believe, but some websites don't offer any way at all for visitors to register, or to contact someone for more information. Others offer a method, but hide it so well that users must go through a number of menus in order to initiate communication.

You should try to offer one or more ways of establishing contact between the prospect and your company on each page of your website. Here are some things you can do to make this happen:

- Include a "Contact Us" button or link on each page of the website. The link should lead to a page that lists office addresses and phone numbers, along with an

email address the prospect can use to initiate communication (for example, info@company.com, or sales@company.com.)

- Include the information above in the “Company Information” or “About Us” section of your website
- Create a contact form application on your site and link to it.

There are several reasons why you want both an email address and a contact form on your site. If all you provide is an email address, prospects who do not have access to their email program won't be able to contact you (perhaps they are using a public computer, or the email account on the computer they are using isn't the one they want to use to make contact). The contact form lets you gather some information about the prospect so that you can better respond to his or her needs. Other people dislike registration forms, and would prefer a more anonymous approach.

Make sure your visitors don't get lost

If your site uses frames, make sure that it is designed so that the contents of child frames do not display by themselves. If a site uses frames, a parent page with no content in it is used to specify the location of two or more child pages, which actually contain the information on the site. This allows, for example, a menu to appear in a constant position in the browser, while the content scrolls below.

Because of the way search engines work, it is possible that a user will click on a link to a framed site that displays only the content page, without the parent or menu. This leaves the visitor with no easy way to browse other pages of the site, or to determine where the content came from.

A well-designed site will have a script on each content page that will detect if it is being displayed on its own, or as part of its frameset. If the content page is being displayed on its own, the page will reload properly, inside its parent frame.

Demonstrate that you are a credible business

By providing a section that provides background information on the site's owner, and a privacy policy, you help make your website prospect friendly. Because of the number of dishonest sites on the Internet, and the ease of creating a website with almost any type of content, visitors want to know who they're dealing with before initiating communications.

By devoting a section of your website to information on your company background, including company history, location, information on your company's management, visitors can get a sense of who you are. If appropriate, you can also include lists of your customers, suppliers, or business partners to further establish your credibility.

A published privacy policy also affects the credibility of your company, and will increase the number of registrations. Website visitors are understandably concerned about what will be done with the personal information they provide on your website. Your privacy

policy should list the information you collect, how you plan to use it, and if the information will be shared with third parties. The privacy policy should also provide instructions for opting out of further communications. This privacy policy should be referenced, at a minimum, from any page containing a registration form, and ideally from every page on the site.

Other Ideas to Encourage Registration

While contact forms and inbound email addresses allow customers who want information to reach you, what about the less motivated prospect? This person has found your website, and is interested in what you have to offer, but doesn't want to order anything now.

Offer a Premium for Registering

One way to increase registrations is to offer some sort of information that is valuable to the prospect. Exactly what you should offer depends on the interests of the visitor you are trying to register, but it should also be relevant to your product or service. Ideally, it should be something that would be available immediately after registration. If visitors feel there will be a delay before receiving the benefit, they will be less likely to register.

For example, a travel agent could offer listings of the top ten things to see in popular destination cities. A food store or food-related company could offer a recipe collection. When dealing with business prospects, as opposed to consumer prospects, a company could offer a white paper on industry trends.

It's probably not a good idea to put material that directly markets your company's product or service behind a registration gateway unless that same information is available in a different form to non-registrants. You don't want to hide your own light under a bushel, as the old saying goes. Of course, some items, such as a printed version of your online catalog, may still require registration.

Distribute a Newsletter

You can also encourage the visitor to register in order to receive information from you in the future.

Distributing a newsletter on a regular basis is a good way to get prospects to sign up at your site. Your newsletter can contain company news, information on new products or services your company is offering, commentary on your industry ... almost anything that your prospects would find appealing.

In order to distribute a newsletter, you will need a way to send the email. You can either purchase software designed to send out the same message to people on your list, or use a service that sends your mail to the names and addresses that you provide.

Be aware that sending out an online newsletter carries responsibilities greater than simply writing the copy. In each newsletter, you will need to offer an opportunity for readers to opt out of receiving further issues. You will need to have a way to keep track of who has opted out of your newsletter, so you do not send mail to them again. In addition, you will need a way to handle bounces for your newsletter. Bounces are replies that are returned in response to your mailing indicating that the mailbox you sent the email to is no longer valid. You will need to delete these email addresses from your database, or flag them so that they won't be mailed to again.

All responses to your newsletter need to be read, and dealt with. In addition to bounces and opt out requests, you will receive requests for follow up, out of office messages, and other types of replies.

Use an AutoResponder

An AutoResponder sends an email automatically to someone based on the occurrence of an event. The simplest AutoResponders send a reply email automatically when a new message is received in an email inbox. You can use a simple AutoResponder like this to thank a prospect for communicating with you, and to promise a customized reply later.

More advanced AutoResponders will send an email once someone completes a registration form on your website. The response can be customized based on information the prospect supplies on the registration form. For example, if the prospect checks a box on the form indicating interest in Product A, then the response will contain a reference to Product A. If the prospect checks the box for information on Product B, then this information is sent in the response.

Advanced AutoResponder systems will let you set up a sequence of mailings to be sent to the prospect over time. For example, when a prospect fills out a registration form, you would send an immediate email thanking them for their interest. A week later, a second email would be sent asking if the prospect had any further questions about your company's products or services, and inviting them to reply. Finally, two weeks after that, another email would be sent with a special offer on your products or services, and inviting them to return to your site.

An AutoResponder is different from a mailing you send out to your list, such as a newsletter or product announcement, because once it is set up, the mailing goes out automatically based on the activity of the prospect. When creating an AutoResponder, you will get better results if you keep it personal. Even though the computer selects the recipients of the mailing based on criteria you provide, make it seem as if you or your staff personally sent the mail. This includes addressing the prospect by name, and having the mailing come from someone specific, rather than a generic "XYZ Corporation".

Getting Traffic from Sources Beyond Search Engines

While search engines can bring your website plenty of traffic, there are other methods you can use to bring visitors to your site. These include visitor referrals, doing cooperative mailings, and using opt-in mailing lists.

A “Send This Page to a Friend” application can bring additional visitors to your site. This type of application lets a visitor to your site automatically send an email to one or more additional people containing a link to a page on your site. Although your site sends the email, you typically don’t retain the email addresses of the person sending the email, or the person it is sent to.

As you build a list of prospect and customer email addresses, you may be able to exchange mailing lists with another company that has a list of prospects that might be interested in your product or service. Typically, companies exchanging lists sell complementary products, or have a supplier/customer relationship.

In most cases, you won’t want to give your list to the other company, since that would violate the prospect’s privacy (and your privacy policy). Instead, you mail information on the other company’s products to your list, with a link to their site for more information. The other company does the same for you. On your landing page, offer the visitor a way to sign up for additional information, thereby adding a new prospect to your list.

Renting Lists of Likely Prospects

In addition to generating leads by doing cooperative mailings, you can rent a list of likely prospects from a third party. Third-party mailing lists contain names of people that have opted-in to receive mailings on specific information of interest to them.

You receive access to these lists through a list broker. The list broker provides demographic information about the list members, so you can make sure that you are mailing to likely targets. You provide the copy for your mailing to the list broker, who actually sends the email. This protects the integrity of the list, and the privacy of the list members. As with the cooperative mailing, you will want to make sure that your landing page contains an incentive for the prospect to register on your site so that you can communicate with him or her directly in the future.

Sending email to a rented list of likely prospects is typically less expensive than sending a printed piece through the postal mail. This is because you do not incur printing and mailing charges when using email. Another advantage to using email is that it affords much better response tracking capabilities than with a printed piece.

You can track the number of people from each list you rent that open your message, and the number of people that end up registering on your site. By using different subject lines and body copy, you can determine the most effective way to get your prospects to register. Putting all this information together lets you use the best message going to the most likely recipients for future email campaigns.

Be careful when working with list brokers, and selecting lists to mail to. There are disreputable organizations that rent or sell lists of email addresses whose owners have not agreed to receive third party offers. The lists are often compiled either by searching the Internet for email addresses left on newsgroups or web pages, or by guessing likely email addresses for ISP's such as Hotmail, Yahoo, or America Online. These lists are the source of much of the spam sent over the Internet.

An honest list broker will disclose the source of the list(s) you are renting, and will not let you receive the names and email addresses on the list directly.

Managing the Information Flow

By using the procedures outlined above, you can develop a list of likely prospects you can market and sell to, either over the Internet, through postal mail, or directly through your sales reps. In order to implement this system, you will need some sort of back end to process the information.

The simplest sort of back end is to handle everything manually. Information gathered on a registration page is sent via email to an inbox, where it is then entered into a spreadsheet, where it is combined with other customer and prospect information. This becomes your outbound email address list. While this system will work for very small lists, it is limited due to the time involved maintaining the list.

A second approach is to use a database attached to the web site to store the information gathered in registration forms automatically. This eliminates retyping information, and can prevent the same person from registering twice. Because this method is more technically complex, it requires more up front work to implement, and someone with technical knowledge to maintain it.

You should try to use the same database for registration information and mailing information. This way, you can maintain a single list of all your prospects, and keep track of their opt out preferences and bounces. Unless you use the same database, you will have to manually enter bounce and opt out information into your registration database, and regenerate the mailing list from the registration database for each mailing.

A unified system lets you find out who has responded to your mailings. If your mailings contain links to your website (or anywhere else), they can be coded so that when the recipient follows the link, a record of the clickthrough is stored in the database. After the

mailing has run its course, you can view a report of all the people that viewed the information represented by the link.

For example, your company has begun to carry a new product. In your newsletter, you briefly describe the product, and offer a link to your web site, where the reader can find more information. After the mailing, you prepare a list of people that clicked through on that link, and call them, offering additional information.

Selecting an Appropriate Back End System

Obtaining and installing the software and hardware necessary to do an effective job of collecting and nurturing leads on your website can be a challenge, particularly for a small business. Unless you have an IT department to support you, and an Internet expert available, you probably don't have the knowledge or expertise to install and maintain a system like the one outlined above.

The situation is complicated when the website is hosted by an ISP, as opposed to the company hosting the site in-house. Particularly in a shared-hosting environment, where multiple web sites are hosted on a single computer, the choice of databases and mailing software is limited by the hosting configuration.

There are several choices for selecting a backend system. The first option is to design your own system. This option gives you the most flexibility in specifying exactly what you want the system to do. However, the cost of designing and implementing a custom system (and getting the bugs out) can be prohibitive.

A second option is to purchase an off the shelf system. Several companies sell lead tracking and mailing software, with prices ranging from several hundred dollars to many thousands of dollars. After the system is installed and configured, it is ready to run, and you will receive support from the manufacturer should you run into problems. Choosing a preconfigured solution may mean that you don't get all the features you would like, or, you may get functions that you will never use. If the system you choose doesn't meet your needs, you are forced either to live with what you have, or find another solution, and throw away the money you spent on the first one.

A third option is to use a service provider that hosts the solution for you. All the software, databases, etc. are at the provider's site, and you are given access to the data over the Internet. As with the off the shelf system, functionality is determined by the service provider. However, as additional features are added to the system, you will get them automatically, without having to purchase a software upgrade. Finally, if the services provided by the solution provider don't meet your needs, you can choose another option, only paying for the services you have already received.

In order to select the best option for your business, you should consider your marketing and sales goals and requirements, along with your budget. A solution designed to distribute leads and website visitor activity to a sales force will be different than one where the final sale is made on the website itself. You may also want to work with a

consultant who is familiar with website marketing and the solutions available. By explaining your goals to a knowledgeable consultant, he or she should be able to provide insight on how to achieve your goals at a reasonable cost.

Summary

Your website can be used as more than a brochure for your company's products or services. A well designed site provides each visitor with opportunities to contact you for more information, whether immediately, or in the future. By offering useful content, you can encourage visitors to register on your site, thereby giving you an opportunity to contact them in the future with your marketing message.

After registration, there are several things you can do to communicate with your prospects. An effective email newsletter keeps your message in front of your prospects and customers. You can use AutoResponders to follow up with the people that have visited your site, and determine if they need more information, or encourage them to return.

You can encourage additional people to register on your site by sending email to lists of likely prospects, either by doing cooperative emails with partners, or by renting lists of people who have expressed an interest in your industry or product area.

In order to use your web site to gather and nurture leads, you will need to store the names you collect, and have the capability to send email to them. While setting up a lead capture and communication system can be an expensive proposition, you can achieve good results with the lowest initial time and cash outlay by outsourcing the contact maintenance and mailing functions to a reliable service provider. It is an inexpensive way to communicate with your best prospects.

About Site ROI

Site ROI is a website marketing company located in Atlanta, Georgia. It was founded with the belief that many companies with websites are not fully leveraging the power that the Internet can bring to their businesses. Many small to midsize companies have not taken advantages of the opportunities available to them to develop more leads and get more sales from their websites, either because they did not have the technical know-how, or the personnel to implement a marketing plan.

Site ROI can develop an implement a marketing plan that will increase the return on investment for a company's website. If you would be interested in growing your pipeline and increasing sales, please feel free to contact us.