The recipe for website success

Amit Sangani* offers advice on producing a winning website.

Try not to place everything in an all-inclusive section titled ‘About Us’. Even if all of your basic information is included in ‘About Us’, the information in this section should be further structured with secondary navigation buttons/menus that guide the user. In addition, the navigation layout should be simple and easy to follow so that users always know what section they are currently accessing. They should also be able to navigate the website backwards and forwards within the site without too much difficulty.

We kept these issues in mind during the development of the Emhart Glass website (www.emhartglass.com). The homepage has been designed so that customers can directly access major sections of the website without wasting time. In addition to using intuitive names, we designed the layout and buttons so that the active section’s navigation text is always highlighted in the colour red, so visitors always have an indication of where they are in the site.

For example, in the ‘About Us’ section, the secondary buttons/menus include links to:
- Emhart Glass-at-a-glance
- Management
- History
- Industry links
- Visitor information

This breaks down large amounts of information into smaller segments that users can easily find and understand. All websites should also offer the following tools: a FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) page, a Sitemap and an internal Search option. The Emhart Glass website offers these tools in its ‘Quick Search’ section. The Sitemap provides customers a quick path to the major sections of a website to help users in locating relevant information. A search box allows customers to locate information using key words in the text. In the FAQ section of our site, we included answers to questions about browsers, screen resolution settings, printing, and passwords.

Content rich

The website should be designed with the customer in mind and represent feedback from all areas of the organisation - marketing, human resources, sales and service. The design should have input from a cross-functional team during the planning stages, as it will significantly influence the content, tone and functionality of your site. The site should also have a mission statement that is an integrated part of the marketing efforts of the company. For example, the Emhart Glass website has the following mission statement: To build brand recognition for our products/services and offer information to our customers and employees worldwide. As a company that has been serving the glass industry for over 90 years, we had a lot of content that could be placed on the site. A cross-functional team was used to determine what information and level of detail about Emhart Glass products and services the site would feature. The ‘Products’ section provides a description of 75 products within 29 product families in 9 technical areas and the ‘Services’ section offers an array of information about installation, maintenance, production and training.

Even if you have built a superb website, its mere existence does not guarantee that people will visit it or use the information it contains. The website must be actively marketed both internally and externally. Organisations can internally promote their site by including its address on business cards, business stationery, company cars, brochures and manuals. This pervasive reminder keeps the site constantly in front of your employees. Externally, companies can register the site with search engines, secure links from other industry websites and even advertise in their industry’s print publications. In addition to marketing the website, companies should support and offer resources that assist their entire industry - especially when one considers the internet as a medium to bring communities together.
forms for their feedback. We offer various online forms via the ‘Contact Us’ section and these include forms for specific products and services. In addition, customers are offered an email address on every page of the site so that they can easily send an email inquiry. It is important that customers get a swift response to their enquiries. If they fail to receive a quick response, they may choose to ignore the site in the future. Emhart Glass has set a target to acknowledge most customer requests within 24h.

**Room for expansion**

Despite the decline of many consumer e-commerce sites, the business-to-business e-commerce is on the rise. Websites are going to become more and more important to companies, especially as they move from simple product/service information sites into fully integrated e-business systems. Therefore, companies will have to consider this when designing their sites, building them for future growth by taking full advantage of new technologies, especially those that offer their customers direct access to the company databases. Examples of these databases include product availability, customer specific pricing and order shipment and tracking. Enhancing sites to include these tools will require planning and perseverance; however, when combined with online ordering and customer service, the tools will help companies greatly enhance their revenues.

**The net result**

With proper planning and a realistic set of expectations, every company can benefit from a presence on the web. The Internet is ready to expand your company’s reach and opportunities to tell the story of your company, products, services or industry. Whether your company has a site - or plans to build one - a properly designed, content rich, user friendly site that offers quick responses will help you reach your goals and increase your return on investment.

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