

The recipe for website success

In the mid and late 1990's, if the question was asked to a corporate executive, "Why do you have a website?" the answer would have been "Because everybody else has one, or is going to have one and therefore we need one." Today, this view has changed. Many companies now realise that 'The Net' can offer them competitive advantages such as: worldwide access to information on a 24/7 basis; reduced costs for distribution of printed marketing and technical materials; potential new customers; online enquiries/sales; remote product/service support and improved feedback.

Designing a website that provides your customers with valuable information and ensuring that your employees and customers know about your website, requires planning and learning new tools including: graphic design, HTML, ASP and Web Hosting.

This article offers a few suggestions, lessons learned, and examples that will help make your website a success. Our experience over the past two years has helped us to understand that a successful site adheres to the following four key design guidelines: user friendly; content rich; responsive and built for growth.

User friendly

Avoid use of animation, heavy graphics or audio on your homepage as these could lead to slow downloads and could lose you viewers even before a web page loads. The homepage design should have a logical structure so that visitors are able to locate the information they are searching for quickly.

Great care must be taken during the design stage to ensure that your website works well with more than one browser. It should be designed to be printer and resolution friendly so users do not have to scroll horizontally to view the contents of the web page. The site should auto-expand its text to fit all monitor sizes.

The most important section of your website should also have intuitive names such as:

- Products
- Services
- Contact Us

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.

WEBSITES

Various tools that a company can use to 'create community' include forums or industry links within the company's main site.

Two industry specific tools offered on our site are titled Punt Marks Online™ and Online Guide To Container Inspection™. The Punt Marks Online tool offers visitors the ability to search for punt marks by country, by customer name or by image. The entire Punt Marks Book can be viewed in HTML or using Adobe Acrobat's Portable Document Format (PDF). The Online Guide to Container Inspection tool allows customers to search for defects by type and find information on defect causes and suggested remedies. This section also indicates inspection machinery that may be used to help detect the specific flaw.

The Emhart Glass site also offers links to other glass container industry websites, and includes links to various recycling websites that offer information about trends in the packaging industry. On the educational side, site visitors can learn the history of glass, the various advantages of utilising glass over other packaging materials and even the operation of a production plant in the 'Why Glass?' section.

Offering timely responses

It is important to keep website content fresh and up-to-date. For example, if a product is no longer manufactured or available, remove it from your product offering. It is also important to keep your contact information updated. A segment of the homepage should be devoted to new features on your website. In this section, you should highlight when the website was last updated so visitors know how current the information on the page is.

Visitors to www.emhartglass.com can learn about the latest Emhart Glass products and services by clicking on the 'What's New' or the 'Latest News' buttons directly from the homepage. All of the updates are organised on a monthly basis and a history of all the updates is available for reference in this section. In addition to these sections, our customers are also offered information through 'Press Releases' and 'Glass Tidings' within the 'Publications/Events' section.

Another important feature for a website is to offer customers online

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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