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B2B

GOES WEB-CENTRIC



For businesses selling to other businesses, Web sites are no longer an afterthought—they've become central to the selling process.

By Gene Rebeck

Not so long ago, business-to-business Web site "design" was dominated by brochure ware—basically, just using the site as a brochure listing the company's products and capabilities. For a great many B2B sites, brochure ware is still the standard.

But more and more B2Bs are using their sites not as static presences but as active players in the selling process. For many, the Web has become the hub of their sales and marketing efforts, as traditional outreach—trade shows, ads in trade magazines, direct mail—all point potential buyers to the site. The culmination of the process is still the face-to-face meeting.

These days, it's the Web site that's making the most successful introductions and generating the most productive leads for B2Bs.

INFORMATION CENTRAL

"What a great B2B site can do is shorten the buying process," says Chris Schermer, president of Minneapolis B2B marketing and interactive agency Schermer Kuehl. "It can bring a buying team closer together in terms of their criteria and understanding whether the company fits their criteria. And it can also, in our experience, cut down on the amount of unqualified leads coming to a sales pipeline."

Potential customers can, in short, self-qualify themselves, determining earlier on whether the company's products fit what they're looking for. Once they decide that, okay, these products could work, they can sign up for more information. Later, that can provide a foot in the door for a sales visit.

"The business-to-business 'buyer' typically is not an individual buyer, but part of an organization," Schermer notes. Such buyers run from a "push" sell like the plague. Engineers, for instance, "are going on line, and looking around to see who might offer the solution or the product to fit their needs," Schermer says. "They're also talking to peers at that time, and they are looking at cures. They do not want to be engaged in a sales process at that point. They're not only reluctant to do it, they are avoiding it, until they qualify you."

To help them qualify a vendor, potential buyers are looking for information. But not information that just lies there—brochure ware does that well enough. They want white papers, industry analysis. With the technology for putting video and other media on line becoming cheaper and easier for non-techies to use, Web site marketing options are becoming broader. Potential customers are looking for

product demos and videos. They want engaging ways to understand and absorb the information.

A for-instance: Along with a cornucopia of product and market information and data, the Web site for Eden Prairie-based data-storage system maker Compellent includes a diagnostic tool that Schermer Kuehl designed to help IT managers calculate their total cost of ownership for storage networks. Visitors answer six questions about their company's data storage capacity, usage, and various costs; the tool then produces a chart that compares the cost of the company's current system with Compellent's products.

Scott Horst, Compellent's director of marketing, describes the company's Web site as a "launching pad" for new information and campaigns. The site also includes customer testimonials and white papers.

"The Web site is pretty central to our [marketing] strategy," Horst says. "You can do content, you can measure, you can get great visuals, and you can get really connected to people very quickly. The Web is the hub of a lot of things."

BRINGING IT TOGETHER

A B2B company's Web site "has to be an extension of everything the business stands for. It can't just be—the Web site," says Ted Risdall, president and chairman of Risdall Marketing Group, a New Brighton-based agency with a large B2B interactive practice. In other words, the Web site is becoming the chief window into a company.

One Risdall client, Mankato-based telco HickoryTech, realized a year or



A tool on Compellent's Web site (top) allows IT managers to calculate the total cost of their storage networks. Datalink's microsite (bottom), efficiencycentral.com, is all about increasing data center efficiencies.

SPECIAL FOCUS

Web Development

two ago that it had outgrown its Web site. Over time, as the company and its capabilities grew, the site became a huge, unwieldy beast that was difficult for customers to navigate. HickoryTech had also made some major acquisitions, buying Plymouth business communications supplier Enventis and Duluth-based CP Telecom, which made organizing its online presence even more crucial. "We wanted to communicate the new HickoryTech," says Jennifer Spaude, the company's director of investor and public relations.

In July, working with Risdall Interactive, HickoryTech unveiled three new Web sites: one for HickoryTech itself (whose customers are a mix of business and residential), Enventis (all of whose customers are businesses), and HickoryTech Information Solutions (which sells software to other telecommunications providers that manages billing and customer service). All are tied together by a single design, with links to the other sites at the top of each home page. Each also features a simple navigation style. "We really needed to demonstrate [our] brands, how they work together," Spaude says.

It's easy for customers to find information even as the company and its offerings expand. "We've put in place a framework in which we can grow on," says Dan Driscoll, Enventis's director of marketing and product management.

HickoryTech's approach—creating separate, streamlined sites for its three chief business units—points to an interactive strategy many B2Bs are using: creating specialized sitelets. Microsites, which promote a single product, product line, or service, can allow B2Bs to introduce new pro-

grams and products without cluttering up their main site.

Chanhasen-based data-storage firm Datalink has a corporate site that defines its capabilities and services. It's so detailed that its fundamental digital architecture is very difficult to change. In the data storage marketplace, tighter budgets have meant that storage buyers are pushing for greater economies in their storage systems.



Pranah's eye-catching home page design (left) conveys a sense of simplicity and sustainability. HickoryTech (right) redesigned its sites to create a unified look.

Wishing to respond to this demand—and not wanting to rework its own site—Datalink asked Schermer Kuehl to create a microsite called Efficiency Central.

Efficiencycentral.com is as much marketing-driven as information-driven with its sharp images and catchy slogans ("Backup is the New Plan," "Less is the New More"). Schermer calls it "a place where people can go for all sorts of content about how to become a more efficient data center. This is phase one. Phase two, we're going to actually bring in much more aggregated content from different partners. Possibly we're going to have a Twitter stream that's incorporated into this, so that Datalink engineers and architects are constantly updating this new information about efficiency or new products."

Data storage may be one of the most innovative spaces in B2B interactive. For Pranah, a Stillwater-based company that has developed a new data storage system, Minneapolis a

agency ASI Communications created a site that is more picturesque than the typical B2B site. (The agency also came up with the product and company name, as well as the logo.) The site is very simple—almost a microsite—and while it has product specs, this is primarily a marketing-driven Web presence, communicating through text and (especially) the

home page image that Pranah's is a distinctive, sustainable approach to data storage.

WHERE YOU'LL FIND ME

There's another consideration in getting buyer eyeballs to a B2B site: making it appear high in search-engine search results—a process called search engine optimization (SEO).

"If [your company's site] is just a virtual brochure, and you're not doing anything to help the search engines to find your site, then you're doing yourself a huge disservice," says Joe Hendershot, president of St. Paul-based marketing firm B2B, Inc.

A B2B company that's serious

about maximizing its Web site's sales potential needs to become familiar with how a site's page title, page description, and keywords can help lure potential customers to the site's pages—and to the specific content of each.

Then there's social media—sites like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Some B2B companies have embraced it; some are ignoring it. But it may be at least worth a cautious dip of the toe—it's free to sign up, and it can be a way for companies to follow what customers and would-be customers are saying about products, and joining in on the conversation. It can also provide another arrow pointing to the Web site.

For instance, Schermer says, Datalink is supporting efficiencycentral.com "with traditional direct mail and e-mail. Then we're also promoting it on all sorts of different social media sites. So we're hoping to get picked up, we're doing Twitter, we've

used Facebook, we've used LinkedIn. We're trying to get bloggers to write about it. And once they do that, now you get linking strategies that go straight into Google. And then getting picked up—that's how you drive up traffic to your site."

And one factor that keeps customers (and search engines) interested is a site that's kept fresh and up to date. Compellent is now planning to update its site in 2010, in part to reach out to customers and potential customers in new ways, sharpening its marketing message. If a company commits to making its Web site more central to its selling strategy, it has to be dynamic—responsive to what customers are looking for, to their concerns, and making adjustments accordingly.

"A Web site," Spaude notes, "is always a work in progress." **TCB**

Gene Rebeck is TCB's senior editor.

