

# A Site For All to See

## Optimizing your website to improve visibility and increase traffic

**Summary:** How do you drive and increase traffic to your website on an ongoing basis? The answer begins by first knowing your current site traffic levels or baseline. From there maximizing the full potential of your site involves using both on- and offline marketing tools including print ads, direct mail, promotions, search optimization, link building, RSS feeds, blogs, organic optimization, Pay-Per-Click (PPC) and other types of online ads, among other things. To implement these tools in the most effective manner requires an analysis both of the website itself, as well as that of the marketing strategy.

Your website traffic. Could it be higher? Could be better targeted? Of course it could. So how *do* you get more of the right people to your website?

Increasing traffic to your website takes time and careful planning. It's not a single, one-time project, but rather, creating a new frame of mind that incorporates the established rules of marketing while embracing new tactics.



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# Establish a Baseline

**First, you need an established baseline.** With a smart Traffic Analysis Package, you can run a report that shows you exactly where you currently stand. Some of the more important things you need to be able to analyze include:

## 1. Visitors

The goal in this analysis is to get a feel for who is coming to the site.

- How many hits are new visitors versus returning visitors?
- What times of day are people coming to your site? Do certain days of the week generate heavier traffic than others? What times of year show increases and decreases?
- How long are people staying on the site?
- How many pages do they go to?

From here, you can ask yourself things like:

- How can I turn first time visitors into repeat visitors?
- How can we get people to interact with the site more?

## 2. Visits and Conversions.

Your goal here is to determine the current ROI of your website (leads versus conversions.)

- How many total visits did my site have?
- How many conversions were generated?
- Which promotions are working well? Which are failing?

From here, you can ask yourself things like:

- Presuming your using PPC ads, what percentage of clicks become conversions?
- How many leads come off the contact form?

## 3. Monitor Site Usability.

Usability tells you how users experience your site and how easy is it to navigate around your site.

Your goal here is to discover:

- What pages do users come in on?
- What pages to users leave from?
- What paths are users using to get around the site?
- What are the top site pages?

From here, you can ask yourself things like:

- What navigation pieces are working well?
- What needs to be improved?



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# Establish a Baseline

## 4. Monitor Search Engine Optimization

The goal in this analysis is to discover what search engines are finding when they scan your site and what users are searching for.

- How often are search engines spidering the site?
- How many people are referred to the site from each different search engine?
- How many people are referred to the site from each keyword phrase?
- What keywords are picked up by which search engines?

From here, you can ask yourself things like:

- Which keyword phrases are working best? Which ones need to be reworked?
- Are people actually searching for what I intend them to search for?
- Are the people coming into my site finding what they are expecting?

## 5. Monitor Site Programming.

Site programming analysis will tell you if your website is working correctly.

- How many 404 (file not found) errors occur? What files and why?
- How many server side programming errors occur? Why?

From here, you can ask yourself things like:

- What errors need to be fixed?

## 6. Monitor Site Performance.

Your goal in gauging site performance is, first knowing if your hardware is working and then, is it sufficient to accommodate the demands of your site.

- How often was the site down?
- How fast are pages being served up on average?
- How much bandwidth is being used?

From here, you can ask yourself things like:

- Should we upgrade/downgrade hosting?
- Do we need to optimize site performance?



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# Traffic Building Process

**Okay, so now you know how your website is working** - what types of traffic and how much is coming to your site, and what your conversions are like. Great. You know where your users are coming from and you know where they are going in your site. From here, our focus will be on how to build on this baseline to increase qualified traffic to your website.

Keep in mind that traffic building is an ongoing process. You have an ever-changing baseline from month to month. And the goals, strategy and tools that you use may change as you grow your traffic. But that's okay - websites exist in a dynamic environment and the rules are changing constantly. Your first job then, is to stay abreast of these changes and make sure you react correctly to what is happening on the Web - and how it affects your site.

**Research and identify how users are going to find information about your products.** It's also critical to know *where* they are buying your products. Are they buying products from you or your distributors/dealers? Do you have information on your site that users understand? Is it easy to find? Is it easy to order? Are you a resource for other sites?

**Identify your target audiences and set your traffic goals accordingly.** You should already have a good idea of whom you are targeting. Having looked at your traffic analysis, you can pinpoint what type of visitors you are getting and if these are the demographics you want. If they are - great. If not, then you need to change your website and/or your search engine optimization path to ensure that the traffic you get is actually the traffic you want.

**Create your strategy.** Your strategy will be constructed around the best ways to achieve your goals and reach your target audiences. From your research, you know how and where your target audiences are finding information on the products/services they want to buy and where they are purchasing these products/services. From here, you need to match your research data with the appropriate tools necessary to reach your goals. Depending on your audience and your website, you may use a combination of online and offline marketing tools, or you may just rely on online strategies.



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# Traffic Building Tools

It's important to keep in mind that users come to your site from various routes. Repeat visitors probably know your URL or have your site bookmarked. When trying to boost traffic to your site, you need to be looking at ways to attract new users that have never visited you before. You want these users to come, visit and bookmark your site for future visits. So, how do you reach these people?

**Linking.** Links are an essential part of building your traffic. They drive traffic when a user clicks on them and they help your rankings in the search engines if they are done correctly.

## **Traffic Drivers.**

These are links that come from an online or offline source and drive users to seek out your website. Users may visit your site to find information, to buy your products/services or to do research.

Links that drive traffic can be found in ads, on your business stationery, on search engines and directories, in published articles, in white papers, in RSS feeds, in blogs, in email newsletters or by viral marketing. The idea is to be creative in creating these while driving your users to specific content and information.

## **Search Engine Rank Builders.**

Knowing that users rarely venture past the first few pages of search results, being number four on the list is infinitely better than being number 348. To achieve the highest rankings, you need links that help you increase your own link popularity for your keyword terms. Remember, you always want to be seen as an expert by search engines. To do this, you need to become a hub for your area of expertise. This requires having other sites recognized as "experts in the field" pointing to your site. In a nutshell, *you* become an expert through association with other experts. Your goal is to find your unique niche or field of expertise and then make sure the Web knows all about you.

Many of these "expert links" can be found in the above list of traffic drivers. However, in order for you to gain credit (and preference) for your association with these experts, they have to easily found by the search engines. You can help yourself by seizing every opportunity to get your name out there. This can involve encouraging links from your partners or, by publishing your own articles/white papers, blogs, press releases, etc.



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# Traffic Building Tools

**Search Engines/Directories.** Search engine use is increasing dramatically every year. According to the Online Activities and Pursuits Report from the Pew Internet Project published on November 27, 2005, the number of users that use search engines on a daily basis increased by about 55% from June 2004 to September 2005, from about 39 million to 59 million.

Users can use search engines and directories to research a company, a product/service, or to find information. Most everyone has heard of Google and Yahoo!, the two behemoths in the search engine/directory world. But there are also many highly specialized vertical search engines and directories which may send greater numbers of qualified traffic to your site.

Search engines/directories can and do help users to find what they are looking for and are important to be listed in. They are not, however, the only source for answers to users' questions. Good research as to how and where users go to find their information will help determine how much you should focus on search vehicles.

**How are you found on search engines?** Organic optimization of your site and pay-per-click advertising can help users to find you for certain targeted keyword phrases.

## **Organic Optimization**

Optimizing your site organically involves reviewing where your users are looking for information about you, then, tailoring your site in order to gain maximum attention from these engines or directories.

Organic (also called natural) optimization focuses primarily on search engines and involves optimization of on-the-page factors, as well as off-the-page factors. The most prominent of these factors include site programming, the design and copy content of your website and how successful you've been at building your link popularity (see Search Engine Rank Builders, above.)

Again, the goal is to make your site an expert authority in its space. To do this, your site needs to be optimized for certain keywords, easily viewable by the search engines, have unique and updated content and have well-placed external and internal linking structures.

## **Pay-Per-Click Search Advertising and Optimization**

Pay-per-click (PPC) search advertising is the fastest way to drive qualified traffic to your site. It is, however, oftentimes very competitive and can be very costly if not managed properly.



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Statistics show that roughly 3 out of every 4 clicks made after someone uses a search engine goes to the natural or organic listings. So if you are ranking well naturally, you may be capturing 75% of your traffic. But why ignore the other 25%? In this scenario you would use PPC search advertising to supplement your already strong position.

If, however, you are finding it difficult to move your site into the first page of results in the natural rankings, PPC search should be used to immediately fill that gap.

PPC searching has matured a great deal over the last few years, one consequence of which being that you may very well find that many of your competitors are already bidding on keyword phrases which are important to you. Because you will be paying money for every qualified visitor who arrives at your site, it is of extreme importance that you be able to monetize the value of those visitors. If you have e-Commerce and sell a product or service through your website, this task becomes a little easier. You simply analyze how many sales you made and what your net revenue is from those specific sales, then compare that figure to your total cost of the PPC search traffic and you'll know whether you're pulling in cash hand over fist, or just flushing money away. If you don't have sales as an online conversion option, you'll need to use a relevant cost-per-conversion standard (whether that be a lead, email sign-up, document/coupon download, etc.) as your success metric and then follow the same comparative process.

The most important thing to do with a paid search program is to continually analyze your results and your return on your advertising investment. This will tell you if you can afford to be the top listing or if maybe the 3rd or 4th position is where you'll see the highest return.

If managed and optimized correctly, it is virtually impossible not to get a positive return from a PPC program. The question, really, is if the sales/conversion volume at that level enough to justify the energy and focus of managing it.



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# Traffic Building Tools

**Email.** Email marketing helps you to stay in touch with your customers, potential customers and others interested in learning more about your area of expertise. On any given day, about 52% of American Internet users are sending and receiving email, according to the Online Activities and Pursuits Report from the Pew/Internet and American Life Project ([http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/167/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/167/report_display.asp)). The use of email as a communication tool still remains dominant in the marketplace for communicating directly with your audiences.

## **Things to think about when setting up an email campaign:**

- Does your audience prefer to get information via email?
- Do you have a strong house list? This is usually the best source of information for sending email to your targeted audience. If not, where are you getting your list? If you don't use a house list you will probably have more unread/deleted emails.
- How often are you sending the email? Really think about this one. How often will you have fresh, new content that users will be interested in reading?
- Who is in charge of the content and making sure that it gets out on a timely basis? This is very important, especially if your users sign up for a weekly, monthly, quarterly newsletter. If the user expects it and doesn't receive it, your brand will suffer and you may get many unhappy emails asking where the email is.
- What content will you be sending out? Where will this information come from? Will you be sending a tips email, a case studies email, an email from the trenches? There may be one or more content variations that you send to your individual lists depending on their specific interests.
- How many different lists are you sending to? You may be sending an email to customers or to potential customers or to media. Or your lists may all go to customers but be segmented into different areas of your business.
- Will a user be able to choose which list to subscribe to?
- What format do you want the email to be in? Do your users like HTML or text? What kind of information are you sending? Do you need pictures to entice the user to click for more or is your audience more analytical - "Just the facts, ma'am" kind of people?
- How will the user opt-in/opt-out of the list? On the email certainly, but can a user sign up on your website?
- Will you have a landing page with more information?



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# Traffic Building Tools

With increasingly tighter controls to block spammers, it has become harder and harder to reach inboxes with bulk emails. AOL recently tightened the enforcement of its 10 percent bounce rate and 0.1 percent complaint rate target thresholds. Email servers are getting bombarded with spam. In an effort to combat this, we are seeing increasing numbers of opt-in emails never getting to the in box of the subscriber. Email clients let you put on your own controls about what can come in or not come in. A marketer needs to consider all these items when putting together an email campaign.

**RSS feeds.** RSS feeds are rapidly becoming a popular way to reach your target audiences. About 10% of the Internet audiences are using these now as a way of receiving news and information.

RSS stands for **Really Simple Syndication** - this means that you can create and publish information easily and simply to a group of subscribers. The information is timely and pertinent because RSS makes it easy to publish and send to your audience. Receivers of an RSS feed have requested this feed because they are interested in receiving your information so your message is expected and welcomed. No longer does your audience have to wait for an email newsletter (which may or may not get to them as SPAM filters become more and more stringent).

There are numerous ways you can use RSS feeds and the potential to do great things with them is definitely there. Think of RSS as the way to keep your constituents updated on what is happening on your site or in your industry. Some uses for RSS include (but are not limited to): news about your company, new products, tech specs, job openings, articles, press releases, updates on products, industry news, stock prices, and more.

## **Some questions to get you started on the best way to use RSS feeds are:**

- Who do you want to target with RSS feeds? RSS feeds are great for the media and those technically savvy and information-centric audiences. Use your research to determine if this is the right vehicle for you. It may or may not be at this time but keep it in mind for the future as it grows in popularity.
- Is your content changing on a weekly or daily basis so your RSS feeds will be updated frequently.
- What content will you publish in the feeds?
- Who will update the feeds?



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# Traffic Building Tools

**Blogs.** In the first quarter of 2005, nearly 50 million Americans, or about 30 percent of the total U.S. Internet population, visited Web logs (blogs,) according to an August report by comScore Networks - a 45 percent increase from first quarter 2004.

Blogs are a great way to build community among your audiences. Blogs let you talk to your audiences about things that interest them. You can center your blog around a product or service and give your company a voice. Blogs have been used to market new products (by giving them a personality, build brands, address customer concerns and give companies a voice and tone.

Blogs are also hitting the mainstream - you can find links to them in the search engines - and they are great tools for building unique content on your site.

## **To create an effective blog, you need to think about the following:**

- Who is the voice of the blog? What kind of voice/personality do you want your blog to have? Do you have someone suitable internally?
- How often will you update the blog? Make sure your voice(s) have the time set aside in their work schedule to be the blog representative.
- What are the rules for what the blogger can say in this open forum? Companies should set policies if the blog is associated with a company so that all bloggers within the company know what to say.

**Other Advertising.** The online world is filled with advertising opportunities beyond search engines, link placements and opt-in emails. Here are some examples of alternative methods of finding new traffic:

- PPC programs have content channel partners who can receive your PPC ads based on the content of their website. So if a user is on a site that is talking about motorcycle accessories and you are bidding on the term "motorcycle accessories" your ad can show up next to the content of that page.
- Other companies have opt-in newsletters which contain sections set aside for sponsors/advertisers. Finding a newsletter targeting your niche can be a great way to find new and highly qualified traffic.
- Blogs, message boards/forums and other online communities are places where many people interested in the same subjects can come to interact. 2005 has been the year of online communities and there is one out there for almost every interest, hobby or idea. Finding those communities that contain members of your target audience gives you access to active and highly loyal community members who you may be able to turn into activists for your product.



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- Rich Media allows you to interact with your audience inside the ad itself, including things like watching a video, or filling out a form or survey, and all without having to visit your site.
- For branding and awareness campaigns, there is still the standard skyscraper ads, banner ads and buttons on industry portals and search engines. As more and more people move away from newspapers, magazines and TV, it becomes increasingly important to get back in front of them during the time they spend surfing the web, shopping online and checking their email. While industry click-through rates are still very low on average, if you use ad networks with geographic, demographic and psychographic targeting capabilities, ad networks with day parting and frequency caps, you can still make online banner ad buys fit into your online marketing mix.

**Online Public Relations/Publicity.** Because they create a "buzz" in the online marketplace, both online public relations and publicity are integral to driving traffic to your website.

Online PR and Publicity are two ways you can tell your audiences about newsworthy items that are happening on your website, or in your company. Sending out your news releases to traditional media outlets is always important (and should include your website address.) To really drive the online user to your site, however, you need to also distribute your news release electronically to the myriad of online resources in your company's industry.

## Questions to consider:

- Who are the key influencers and purveyors of websites topical to your company?
- What kind of information are they interested in?
- Beyond the typical websites, are there blogs, discussion forums, etc. that are talking to your audience on a regular basis?
- Do you have news that should be distributed via a national wire service such as PRNewswire or BusinessWire?
- Have you optimized your news release for keyword terms?

## Online Press Kit.

In order to keep investors and clients "in the know" about your company (and to drive them to your website,) create an online press room where you can highlight current news releases and archive older ones. By keeping all pertinent press information contained in one place on your company's website, your "online press kit" becomes a valuable and easily accessible resource for the media.



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# Traffic Building Tools

**Affiliate Marketing.** Affiliate marketing isn't a new concept in the marketing world. Simply put, it's the idea of paying a sales force only on a commission-basis. If they perform, they make money - lots of money if they do it well. If they do not put any energy into selling your product, they make no money and you aren't out anything in the process.

An affiliate marketing relationship has three players - the merchant/advertiser is the company selling the product or service, the affiliate/publisher is the sales person (which for our purposes is a webmaster or website manager/owner) and finally, the customer. The process goes something like this:

1. A customer surfing the web goes to one of your affiliates' sites and sees your link or ad on their page.
2. The customer clicks the link, arrives at your website and decides to purchase a product or service.
3. The sale to that customer is confirmed, and the affiliate is paid a commission on that sale.

There are many different models for affiliate programs depending on the type of business. Some pay commissions on sales only, some pay commissions on leads, some on registrations, etc.

## **Some questions to think about before starting your own affiliate program are:**

- If you don't have e-commerce, are you able to determine the quality of a lead before you pay the commission? If not, make sure you only allow affiliates you trust to join or the unknown ones will take advantage and find ways to submit false leads.
- Is your product something the end user will need to research some before the purchase? If so, they might leave your site to go find more information. If this is the case, it's possible, depending on your program settings and the length of time before the actual purchase, that the affiliate will never get credit for the sale. That may sound good because you don't pay a commission, but when the affiliate doesn't see any money they will be quick to switch to running ads for a competitor instead.
- Do you have enough margin built in to your product sales to pay a competitive commission rate? If not, it will be difficult to find affiliates to join your program.



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# Traffic Building Process

**Test.** Testing your message and method of delivering your message will help you to identify what works and what is not working. You can test on a subset of the intended audience or you can test certain keywords/pages/ads on each search engine. Some campaigns cannot be tested. In these cases, rely on your research and your past experience and build on these.

**Implement.** You are almost ready to put your strategy into motion. Before you start the implementation process, you need to make sure all your tracking and monitoring mechanisms are in place and working. This can include tracking codes in your URLs, on your website, at your call center. Once everything is in place, to capture accurate data for review, you need to be sure to have your site analysis or ad campaign management tools set up to capture paths through the site, where your users are coming from, and how they arrived at your site.

Once the tracking mechanisms are in place, you are ready to start implementation of your strategy.

**Evaluate.** Each of the tools that you have elected to use to help you drive and increase traffic to your site should have some benchmark or goal to evaluate against. You will need to evaluate these on a periodic basis and adjust your strategy accordingly. These may be big adjustments or small adjustments. The great thing about the Internet is that, due to its dynamic nature, you can make changes as often as needed to achieve your goals. It's also important once the data is collected to have good evaluation tools that will let you compare apples to apples and will keep all your stats in one or two places.

**Adapt and Change.** Improving visibility and increasing qualified traffic to your website is a dynamic process - a continuous cycle of reviewing your website data, benchmarking it, developing strategies to target the most qualified audiences, implementing and testing those strategies, analyzing the results and then starting at the beginning again.

Each time you go through the cycle you learn more about what works to target your audiences and who your most qualified and profitable audiences are. This allows you to make more intelligent decisions on website design and where to direct your marketing budget.

Setting up this process can take time, but once in place you will see an immediate impact to bottom-line results as you turn your marketing dollars into qualified traffic and a measurable revenue stream.



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# Traffic Building Process

Just as the Internet itself is an ever evolving medium, so too must your site be in a continual process of analysis and readjustment in order to capitalize on changes on the Web. Starting with research, audience identification and setting goals and objectives, the process defines a continual cycle of strategic planning, testing, implementation and evaluation.



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