◆ *Beyond Brochureware: Giving Your Web Site Value*

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In the beginning, the Internet was used primarily for research and publishing. C Michael Phillippe, Michael Melvin, and John Bruel explored the other side of the Internet—the marketing side—and how organizations can use Web sites to enhance their entire business.

Phase I Web-site development began around 1991 with sites that were static representations of company brochures, according to Phillippe. In Phase II, companies began monitoring the visitors to their Web sites. In Phase III, customized pages aimed at repeat visitors were developed on the basis of information collected from visitors. In Phase IV, one-to-one marketing evolved, using the personal information collected from visitors to provide customized products and services to turn repeat visitors into customers.

Changing brochureware to dynamic, personalized Web pages requires knowing how to manage the content on a Web site, Melvin said. Traditional sites were developed for mass marketing. They contain information about an organization and some forms, but visitors must go offline and use the telephone, fax, or mail to complete transactions. When visitors have to complete extra steps, it is uncertain whether they will complete a transaction or return to the Web site.

Marketing and brochureware aim at bringing strangers to Web sites, Melvin said, but sales aim at building and maintaining relationships—changing visitors into target customers. To produce a dynamic site that has loyal repeat customers, is bookmarked, and generates revenue for your organization, you first must determine who your visitors are and then give them what they want. Generally, visitors are of four types: existing members, prospective members, mass-media news organizations, and the concerned public. Provide existing members with password security, the most recent organization news, chat areas, and bulletin boards. Give prospective members sample information, such as a 6-month-old newsletter, membership information, and the membership process. Offer the news organizations article reprints and organization information. Provide the concerned public with some incentive to return to your site, such as minimembership with online registration and free health information. Your Web site, Melvin said, should become self-sufficient by providing one-stop shopping, should be appealing enough to get bookmarked, and should be updated frequently.

Anyone who has purchased a product from Amazon.com has experienced an early attempt at one-to-one marketing. By using information collected and stored in databases, said Bruel, companies cannot only change visitors into customers, but also anticipate customers' needs, providing them with information about products and services before they ask.

To anticipate customers' needs, said Bruel, a company must have a comprehensive strategy for gathering and analyzing customer data. A digital content-management system (CMS) is a software platform that supports the development, manipulation, storage, archiving, and presentation of information. A good CMS links information describing an audience to specific content attributes. If customer information is collected in a database and analyzed with a CMS, Web-site content can be developed to appeal to customers' particular interests and needs. Some Web sites offer tiered content, such as various account types at financial sites and different types of products (books, film, and music) at media sites.

Before marketing products and services to customers, get permission (permission marketing) to do so, offer individualized incentives on your Web site or through personal e-mail (e-mail marketing) to customers to obtain more personal information from them, provide feedback mechanisms, and respond promptly. Your Web site should create a unique experience for each visitor. If you use data-mining to gain insight into customers' characteristics and personalize content offerings and marketing messages, you can provide customers with services tailored to their specific needs. For example, a site might send weather and traffic information each morning to a customer who has to commute to work each day.

New marketing methods and delivery mechanisms are unlimited; information gathered can be sliced and diced infinitely. Companies are no longer just selling products and services; they are attempting to manage the producer-consumer relationship. The Internet offers ever-increasing opportunities to get close to your customer. ◉