

WEB MARKETING TOP TIPS TO BEAT THE RECESSION

MARKETING BEST PRACTICES

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John Simpson, Managing Account Director for marketing and business development solutions company, Hubbard One, offers tactical tips on how to achieve quick and inexpensive new business wins by cleverly deploying a range of Web marketing activities.

The issue of how much time and money professional services firms should invest in marketing and business development during a downturn remains a vexing one.

Some firms view a bear market as a time to exercise caution. They avoid experimenting with new marketing techniques, particularly costly ones, and may in fact cut down on existing activities. Their choice is to ride out the recession with a wait-and-see attitude.

Other firms choose to take a more aggressive stance. They bank on competitors reducing their marketing spend during the recession, and view this as an opportunity to storm ahead, outperform the competition and, through a range of new initiatives, increase their market share.

Though both approaches have merits and drawbacks, Web marketing offers a middle path that can be leveraged to create some excellent business development opportunities during challenging economic times.

Web marketing is effective, inexpensive and offers measurable ways to strike up new relationships with prospective clients. It has a short-term focus, is quick to activate and, because you can measure its effect, can be easily altered or redirected if it does not achieve the desired results.

A recent study of the Web habits of general in-house counsel, conducted by Wicker Park Group on behalf of Hubbard One, points to the Web as a key influencer on buying patterns. As one in-house counsel commented, "A bad website would be like showing up to a meeting with me in a crumpled suit." Decision makers often use firm websites to collect background information and influence decisions about which firms are going to make it onto their short list.



BEST PRACTICE TIPS:

The following best practices offer principles and associated tactics to consider when developing new Web marketing activities. These practical techniques can be carried out immediately, and will reap rewards for months to come. Although you may need some additional resources to implement the following principles, none require a significant capital outlay.

FOCUS ON CONTENT

Leverage event content: One of the easiest and cheapest ways to jump-start your marketing efforts is to reuse the content from events you have already staged. Events make up roughly 12% of any firm's marketing budget. They are stressful and time-intensive to produce, so you should aim to leverage the content gleaned from the event by putting it back on your website to encourage people to revisit it or find it afresh via your site search mechanism.

Videotaping an event, which can be hosted from your site at a later date, can be an extremely effective marketing tool. Remember to also include a PDF or PowerPoint® of the presentation on your site, as not everyone will want to view content as video or webcast. If the content lives as hard copy, search engines will be able to catalogue it, which in turn will make it easier for casual browsers to find it.

Wherever possible, look to create a community of interest from events. A good way of continuing the conversation with new business prospects who attended an event is to set up a discussion board or blog, allowing extra content to be added and prolonging the interaction between attendees. Look for inexpensive ways to drive post-event traffic back to the event page – for example, through targeted email or email signature links from speaker biographies.

Create content-rich pages site-wide: Almost half the traffic to professional services firms' sites comes from somewhere other than the home page. So it is important to create content-rich and visually creative pages across your entire site, not just the home page. Having said that, some pages will always have higher traffic, so make sure you put most of your presentation effort into those.

Understand your audience: Always consider how your clients would like to see content presented, and repackage it accordingly. Present content in terms of your clients' issues, rather than around the internal structure of their firms (e.g., by practice groups). To do this, you need a deep understanding of your client, but the payoff can be huge if done properly, as it provides the firm with the opportunity to implicitly cross-sell its services.

THINK SEO

Optimize key pages: The rise of Google™ has made search engine optimization (SEO) of paramount importance. Our research shows that in-house decision makers at firms use the Web for research an average of 85% of the time versus other resources, and 60% of the time Google was listed as the most popular site for research. To ensure your firm's site ranks highly in search engine listings, optimize key pages with specific title tags, keywords and descriptions.

Friendly URLs: To help maximize traffic to your site, create market-friendly URLs and ensure proper cross-linking within the site. Consider creating focused landing pages, as these provide a different route into the content and can be designed to specifically attract new search engine traffic.

GO BACK TO FUNDAMENTALS

Email marketing: Almost every firm we work with today undertakes some form of email marketing activity. Because it is now so ever-present, firms need to work harder to ensure their messages don't get lost in the flood of competing emails arriving in clients' inboxes. If your firm is not seeing between 5-15% click-through rates from its email marketing, it may be time to reassess your approach.

The most consistently violated rule of email marketing is providing value to your recipients. Think about the needs of your audience and ensure you follow these key rules:

- Ensure you know to whom you are sending your email
- Know what they want to receive
- Know how/when they want to receive it
- Know how they are going to use it

It is also valuable to review the design of your email to ensure it meets best practices and, where possible, to measure and produce actionable intelligence from your email marketing statistics. Intelligence can include answering which design layouts achieve the highest click-through rates, what style of subject line is the best at encouraging recipients to open the email, and whether or not your "calls to action" are working properly.

Websites: The same back-to-basics approach should be taken with your website. The first thing to do is to ensure there are multiple access points to content on your site. Beyond having scrolling links to news articles, it pays to think of other ways to hook people deeper into your site. Target key audiences with questions or commentary that you know they will appreciate and visit early if there is a clear path leading them there.

Showcase your client work on your website and incorporate your fee-earners' experience. Highlighting your firm's successes and knowledge is a powerful business development mechanism. Always have a link on the home page that takes people directly into the credentials area of your site, and make sure they are part of the search capability.

GO WILD

The power of social networking: Employing the power of social networking is a great way to leverage your existing Web content. Make sure the content on your site can be bookmarked, so people visiting it can show that content to other people within their specific network. Rather than closing down access to sites such as Facebook and MySpace, steer your staff to use the tools productively for the benefit of the firm. Establish an online networking policy as a guide for new users and a boundary for people already using the tools.

Monitor social media: Monitor popular content sharing sites to see who is talking about you and mine that sharing site for business development intelligence. Watch how the content you provide is described and tagged, and use this to track which content your audience is most interested in. This will give you insight into understanding the needs of that client and allow you to formulate the types of topics you can provide down the track to better meet their needs.

Turbo-charge relationships: You can also consider using LinkedIn and Facebook to turbo-charge an existing client relationship management program. These sites are an invaluable tool for discovering who your audience is connecting with. Use these sites to supplement the information you already have in your system and to build new networks.

EXPAND YOUR LINES OF COMMUNICATION

Syndicate your content: Content syndication is a great way of pushing your content out into your target markets and expanding your firm's lines of communication. The easiest way to do this is through RSS (Real Simple Syndication). While many firms now have one RSS feed available, having just one for an entire firm's content is often not enough. By breaking your RSS feeds down by type of content or audience, you can serve up targeted information to a defined group. Also, ensure that you embed your RSS feeds at the relevant touch points in your website – such as in articles or on practice group pages.

GO DEEP

Serve your audience: Once you have built a profile of your audience, it is a good idea to re-segment and prioritize the content you serve them. For example, re-engage with the media by providing them with access to appropriate information and resources, or create mini-sites around areas of expertise that you know will attract certain types of business traffic.

Engage in dialogue: Always look for ways to engage in an ongoing dialogue using podcasts, email, social networking sites, or blogs. Remember to promote your targeted efforts to the appropriate media and trade organizations. In turn, these organizations can furnish you with reciprocal links which will help you extend your audience share.

MEASURE EVERYTHING

Move beyond content-centric analysis: A downturn can offer firms the chance to take some time getting their Web analytics in order. Currently, most professional services firms are in a content-centric phase of Web analysis, looking at the number of page views on their site. But moving beyond that to analyze traffic to particular areas of your site and to measure the type of traffic that comes in from one particular client, can be an enlightening process. For example, if you have recently pitched to a client, measuring what type of traffic that generates and seeing exactly what content that client is interested in can be extremely valuable.

Look to move beyond simply measuring page views and hits. It is easy to get lost in this generic data, which often doesn't provide much context. Instead, we advise our clients to structure their Web analytics metrics around their particular business and marketing objectives.

GENERATE MORE LEADS

Call to action: Over the past year, we have seen a huge shift in firms' attitudes toward their websites. Today, business-to-business law firms are looking to squeeze more client development value out of their sites. In short, they want the website to help generate qualified leads. To do that, firms should take a cue from more consumer-oriented sites by including at least two overt "calls to action" on every page. Unlike consumer sites, where calls to action can often take the form of "Buy now" or "Click here to save 20%," a firm's calls to action should be built around pushing the user toward taking an action that would most likely lead them to becoming a client, such as "Register for this event" or "Click here to see Partner X discuss the implications of Y."

At a time when professional services firms' budgets are under close scrutiny, a marketing department's ability to do more with fewer resources will be highly valued. Paying close attention to practical advice such as the above will help a firm improve the effectiveness of its Web marketing and provide short-term benefits that can be leveraged to even greater effect in the future, once the recessionary gloom lifts.

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