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Perspectives in Web Marketing: The End User Still Steers the Ship

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Tracking the ebb and flow of trends in Web marketing can, in itself, be a full time job. So Communications Association of the Southern Tier (CAST), an organization of Binghamton, NY-area communications professionals, recently invited four Web-savvy specialists in to provide some up-to-date insight into modern Web marketing. The most important lesson learned? Getting your service, data or product out into the world remains an interesting voyage—and the user, reader, or customer on the other end is still in charge.

The Promise of Content Management

Information is rarely used once. For example, a "what's new" item about your business might be right for your Web site, your hard-copy newsletter, and for your corporate e-mail update. According to Robert Bullock, of Upstate Internet Services, guiding the same information to the right medium—in the right format—is at the heart of content management.

Bullock described the elements of content management as:

- Content: pure information devoid of any layout or presentation.

- Presentation: The implementation of presenting that content. "It could be content presented as a Word document, a PDF, a video...it could even be Braille."
- Management: Organizing, categorizing, structuring and storing data in such a ways that you can publish it in different media.
- System: The actual software system that gives those managing the data an interface for working with it.

To see how it can all come together, Bullock pointed to RareVideo.com, for whom his company designed a Web-based content management system. RareVideo.com deals in not just videos, but also Hollywood memorabilia. "It takes a lot of information to describe his 20,000-item inventory," said Bullock, "and it's complex data... Titles, stars, studios, directors, the condition of old movie posters for sale.... There was no inventory management product out there that we could use that would be useful for his customers."

So Upstate Internet Services built a custom database to describe RareVideo.com's inventory in great detail. And they made it browser-based, so the company's workforce—distributed across

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the country—can easily access it. “Employees basically sit at their home computers, log into his Web site, and add to and manage his inventory,” thus providing integration and ease of use that, says Bullock, would not be possible with off-the-shelf software. “And because it’s in a structured format, we can publish it up to a variety of sales channels: eBay, Froogle, Yahoo, etc., with little or no additional work.”

Bullock says applications of Content Management extend beyond the Web. “You might be managing a newsletter. With conventional software, it’s only one purpose, one context. If you want to use it in another context, you have to cut and paste. With a content management system, once it’s in database or XML document, it can be flowed into different media—the newsletter layout, then an e-mail newsletter, PDF document for web access, and so on.”

When it comes to presenting content in a medium and format useful for the end user, the promise of Content Management is growing, says Bullock. “It’s the really hot thing right now.”

Web Page Design: Keeping it Simple

“Web site design is about information design. Don’t think so much about the colors or pictures. Think about information organization.” So says Joe Ligouri, formerly of Riger Advertising.

“Most people—especially your customers—view the Web as a library, not a source of entertainment. They hate to be kept waiting.” That

means, says Ligouri, that the keys to effective Web page design are clean structures that help people find content quickly, and simple, strong layouts that allow them to absorb information easily.

Ligouri noted that taking a tip from the pros can help. He recommended examining how mega-sites like Amazon.com and eBay design for user-friendli-

ness; both are notoriously successful at organizing a large amount of content that’s easy to search through.

Modern Web page design has settled on common usability elements such as footer links at the bottom of every page, slim mastheads that allow for more page content, and dark text on a light background.

But what about all the ‘extras’ people add to their pages? When customer usability is at stake, says Ligouri, ‘no tricks’ is a safer strategy. “Swirling logos, animated e-mail postboxes... even page counters... are signs of an amateur Web site.” (More tips from Joe can be found at <http://www.riger.com/cast/>)

Ligouri noted that second- and third-generation Web sites always seem to evolve in ways that make the site more useful and easier for the end-user to navigate. “Today’s most successful Web sites,” he says, “are designed from a consumer’s point of view.”

The Role of Multimedia

How do you decide whether to include multimedia on your Web site, or in your CD? According to Pete



Yeager, of JL Video and Multimedia, the secret is to step back to the end user's perspective. What does the user get from it?

Multimedia, says Yeager, isn't just using different media in a presentation of content. It's using the medium best suited to convey information. "Video has certain uses, where it's absolutely critical to use video with. Other times, it's better to use a text document, and more useful." Whether it's video, a Flash animation, or simply audio, the real value lies in how the content is integrated into the presentation to enhance the understanding of the viewer.

Yeager illustrated his points with a presentation JL did for United Health services, which incorporated video integrated into a Flash presentation. The advantage of using Flash as the "master format" of a presentation, says Yeager, is that the final product could be played on a computer, and then ported to the Web—"theoretically." The roadblock to a seamless translation? Bandwidth, which may require a "dumbing down" of the presentation to accommodate the speed limits of the Internet. Videos may be shortened, further compressed, or even used as a series of stills. Effects may be trimmed. So once again, he noted, the end user's experience guides how the different media are used.

A key potential in integrating multimedia into content presentation, says Yeager is that—when skillfully applied—it can increase the user's options to create an "information path." Always keeping the expectations of the user in mind, a designer can provide a system of menus, audio/video segments, and animations that free the user to see and absorb information in the way most convenient or meaningful to them.

"Always step back, and really think about what you need to communicate, and what the user is going to get from this information," Yeager says. "Do you need pictures, or video, or animation?

Because once you start with that approach, you can weed out unnecessary stuff and end up with a slimmer, more useful tool."

Search Engine Optimization: Make it easy to be noticed

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of structuring your Web site so that popular search engines (Yahoo, Google, etc.) add your site pages to their database, and then—hopefully—"rank" your site high enough in people's searches to do you some good.

And, says SteadmanTech's Gary Steadman, "Search engine optimization is critical if you depend on the Web for attracting business."

Putting the proper mechanics in place is critical. These include:

- Key words and metatags within each page's code. These are the descriptive words and phrases search engines glean from your pages.
- Proper use of page titles and "first paragraph" text. Many search engines rank your pages based on the correlation between key words, page title, and the first readable text on the page.
- Paid submission, where you pay or bid for key words in return for better ranking. "Consider how much you're willing to pay for better search engine results," says Steadman, "because it then needs to be part of your budget."
- Encouraging/fostering back-links. Pages are often rated higher when other relevant pages from other sites are linked to them.

But even within such an apparently automated, or code-centric, science as search engine optimization, the end user still rules. The success of your efforts depends on how well you can think like

your customer, and then construct your optimized site to reflect that understanding.

For example, says Steadman, "Key phrases can be more important than key words. Take a commercial printer who wants to increase traffic on his site. He might focus on a key word such as 'printers,' which sounds like a perfect choice... but it's not. You might get a lot of traffic, but a lot of it might be from people looking for inkjet printers, photo printers.. it wouldn't be traffic that's useful for your business." Not a great result, especially if you've decided to pay a search engine for each click-through to your site.

A better choice, Steadman said, would be key phrases that use three or four words, such as "Commercial printers, offset, Binghamton, NY." When your pages' key phrases properly 'an-

swer' words that users valuable to you enter into a search engine, those who end up at your site are already pre-qualified as potential customers. "One or two words attract browsers," says Steadman. "Key phrases attract buyers."

Safe Passage in Shifting Tides

Whether designing a content management system or a simple Web page... Choosing the right media for your presentation or optimizing your Web site... Amid a stunning and growing array of options, avenues and opportunities, the point of embarkation appears to be as constant as the Northern Star: stand with your customers, readers, or end users. Look at what they want, and trust their needs. You have to. When it comes to marketing effectively on the Web, they're the ones at the wheel.