

*Conversation Marketing*TM

Opening — and maintaining — business relationships using the World Wide Web

By Ian Lurie

What does your web site do for your business? If you're scratching your head, don't feel bad — you're not alone. About 90% of the professionals I talk to feel that their web site does nothing to promote their organization. Why is that? If you spend thousands of dollars creating a site, shouldn't it help you grow your business?

Yes. But too many web sites are passive promotional engines — they look nice, but once you get past the attractive wrapping, there's nothing inside. How many times have you seen a web site, ooohed and aaaahed at the graphics, and then left, never to return?

The Internet is an interactive medium, and your promotional strategy needs to take advantage of that fact. If your web site doesn't engage visitors, then you've crippled your web-based promotional efforts.

Not just for sales. I talk a lot about sales goals in this article. But these concepts apply quite nicely to any communications goal. Whether your objective is to win an election, sell more stuff, get more subscribers or who knows what else, these Conversation Marketing will help you get there.

Think of a web site as a real-world conversation. On the web, you have to do the same things you'd do talking to a sales prospect in person:

- Know the Room
- Look appropriate
- Sound smart
- Observe and adjust
- Make a connection
- Brag modestly

You can accomplish these goals with an awareness of audience, goals and technology. Once you do, you'll get out of passive Internet marketing and start conversation marketing.

KNOW THE ROOM

When you start any communications campaign, you need to know who you're communicating *with*, first. And don't trust your own judgment on this, if you can avoid it. Remember, it's not about what you like — it's about what your audience likes. To Know the Room, you have to answer three simple questions:

- What's my conversion goal? That is, what do I want visitors to do when they get to my site?
- Who is my audience?
- What questions will be foremost in their minds when they arrive at my site?

You can very likely learn the answers through a few basic methods:

- Ask them! Interview customers — what do they like about working with you? What would they like to change? Why did they hire you in the first place? Why would they leave? If you can, interview folks who aren't customers yet, too.
- Research: There's a wealth of good (and bad) consumer research out there. Some of it's free, and some isn't, but there aren't many more worthwhile investments.
- Talk to the people on the ground: If you have a salesforce, or any other people who are responsible for direct interaction with your audience, interview them, too. They hear the same questions, again and again. They also know what you can and should try to get visitors to do when they arrive at your site. If you can answer those questions, you'll turn more visitors into participants.

Knowing the room is the foundation of a successful campaign. Ignore your audience at your peril. Here's a quick example: Three years ago, one of my clients (who hadn't yet hired us) redesigned their web site to use Flash, video and a very image-heavy, slow-loading design. Their CEO was an past entertainment industry marketer, and wanted to see something with some pizzazz. The design was striking — it could've won a Webby Award. But their sales plunged. Why? Because they were selling office products. Their customers wanted an office supply store, but they got an amusement park, instead. We revamped the site to use a cleaner, faster look that emphasized simple product selection and ordering, and their sales jumped by 220%.

Remember, you're putting your organization on the Internet to attract an audience — not to make yourself feel good.

LOOK APPROPRIATE

Looks *are* important. If you walk into a networking event with a wild look in your eye and a foodstained shirt, chances are you won't have many productive conversations. If, on the other hand, you're neatly dressed, smile at the people you see and introduce yourself politely, *someone* will talk to you. If you're going to formal affair, you have to look formal. If you're going to a casual get-together, you have to look, well, clean.

If you don't want to spend the money to look 'good', then at least try not to look bad. A page full of twirling animations and 30 point, bright pink text won't invite anything but a snicker. Even a low-budget web site can do the job if you keep your design simple, functional and user-friendly.

It's critical that you look **appropriate**. Note that I'm not saying you have to look 'good'. Good is a very subjective term. It's more accurate to say that you need to look right in context.

The same thing is true on the Internet. The first test a person applies to your web site is appearance — if your web site design is appropriate in the context of your industry or mission, chances are most visitors will stay long enough to learn a little bit about your organization. Always make sure that your web site looks appropriate for your business.

SOUND SMART

If you look appropriate, then someone's probably going to want to talk to you. If you babble incoherently or drone endlessly on, they'll change their minds, fast. You have to have something to say, and it has to be succinct, entertaining, and relevant.

The web is no different. If your web site looks great but has nothing to say, the person it helps is the designer. Effective, well-produced content, whether it's text, graphics, audio or video, is absolutely critical to conversation marketing.

Think about it — how many times do you visit a really slick looking web site, try to find what you want or make sense of the content, and then leave, never to return? Good, relevant design made you look. Clear, useful content makes you stay.

If you don't know what these terms mean, hire a web designer who does, or read up...

Another element of sounding smart is usability: Make sure your site looks good and works well in all browsers. Write accessible code. And make sure you practice good contingency design.

Sound smart, and you keep a visitor's attention.

OBSERVE AND ADJUST

Let's go back to our networking event for a moment: You're deep in conversation with a CEO, telling her about your organization. She's interested, asking relevant questions, and isn't glancing at her watch. All good signs. Then you make a comment about how environmentally friendly your office is. She says:

"Oh, all that tree-hugger stuff. I want to work with a company that focuses 100% on efficiency."

Uh-oh. What to do? Well, even if she walks away, you've learned something — your environmental cause is important, and a good thing, but maybe it's not part of a conversation with other professionals. When you start your next conversation, you know what not to say. If she stays, then you have a chance to tell her that your recycling program has actually saved your business money, allowing for lower costs to clients.

On the Internet, you can gauge visitor response and adjust your conversation, too. You may not be able to see the look in their eye, but something as simple as a web site traffic report can tell you which pages of your web site get the most attention, and which ones drive visitors away. Combine that with conversion tracking, and you've got an unrivaled source of business intelligence.

Let's take the recycling program again. You add a page to your site emphasizing that you are an environmentally-friendly business. A month later, you note that only 100 people looked at that page, compared to 200 for your 'services' page, and that they all left the web site after reading about your recycling programs. And almost none are contacting you. Armed with that knowledge, you revise that page to show how, by being a 'green' office, you save your customers money. A month later, you have slightly better traffic on the page, and more important, people who read that page don't leave the web site — they continue on to other pages. Best of all, the number of contacts from potential customers has jumped, too.

Your web site is a gold mine of information about how the public responds to what you say. You can use this information to adjust your conversation across all media. The important thing to do is observe response and adjust accordingly.

MAKE A CONNECTION

So, your conversation is going great. The CEO is very interested in your product, has explained several situations where she feels it might help her company, and wants more information. Do you then turn and walk away, happy with a job well done?

Of course not. But most web sites do exactly that. Just as you exchange business cards when you're done with a productive conversation, you need to give visitors to your web site a way to keep in touch with you if they're interested.

E-mail conversation marketing is an article in itself, so I'll keep this short. Suffice it to say you can apply the principles in this article to an e-mail campaign as easily as you do to your larger Internet strategy.

E-mail is the most efficient, effective way to do this. It's ubiquitous and easy to use. You can prompt visitors to sign up for your e-mail newsletter. A monthly or quarterly newsletter reminds busy people that they liked what you had to say, and might want to keep in touch. And, you can observe response to each newsletter and adjust accordingly, just as you would observe and adjust content on the web site. E-mail is a conversation in itself.

Don't overlook other methods, though — we've seen RSS and Podcasting, for example, generate tremendous interest. A well-considered blog can work as well.

You can get even more creative: One of our clients had us create a custom 'skin' — the interface and look for a piece of software — for a media player. Visitors to their web site can download that skin and install it, so that they see the media player, branded for our client, every time they play a CD.

BRAG MODESTLY

You always get more conversations going if someone introduces you as 'the one who I told you about'. An introduction, or a little notoriety, pulls in interested folks faster.

On the Internet, you can get the same effect by making sure you're ranked well on search engines. If someone needs a widget, searches on Google for 'widgets in Seattle' and finds you, you accomplish two things: First, you get them to come to your web site. Second, you create the impression that you're serious about what you do — after all, you're listed on a search engine, right?

Search engines are just one way to brag — pay-per-click advertising, though often maligned, can be very, very effective. Buying ad space in an e-mail newsletter is also a great promotional tool. And something as simple as asking other web sites to link to you can draw in more visitors and improve your search engine ranking, at the same time.

PR is one of my favorite tools. Get yourself quoted in an article as an expert in your field. Or write a useful article and get it published on the web. Portent's web site saw a fivefold rise in site traffic and increased e-mail newsletter signups a month ago, when I was quoted in an article about e-mail marketing.

However you do it, bragging is good. Done right, it generates more site traffic from interested visitors.

Don't go too far, though. If you run a search engine or other promotional campaign, be honest. Make sure you only register with search engines under truly relevant keywords. Don't get registered under 'sex' if you sell tires. Don't make outrageous claims. If you use PR don't try to sell your product right then and there. Educate. Entertain. Give readers something to contemplate. If you do that they'll want to hear more, and the selling will follow. Always brag **modestly**.

STRIKE UP A CONVERSATION

The Internet is the perfect medium for conversation marketing. Don't view your web site as a passive brochure — it's your only truly two-way marketing device, aside from a personal presentation. Just the knowledge you gain about your audience and organization, and how the two interact, will justify the investment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 1995, Ian Lurie started **Portent Interactive** as a full-service web consultancy, aimed at helping companies build customer relationships using the Internet. With over 9 years experience as an Internet consultant, developer and designer, Ian works with Portent Interactive clients to develop the best online strategies for their organizations. Portent is now 15 people and growing, with clients across the US, and in Italy, France and Canada. Clients include Princess, WRQ Software and The Dessy Group.

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