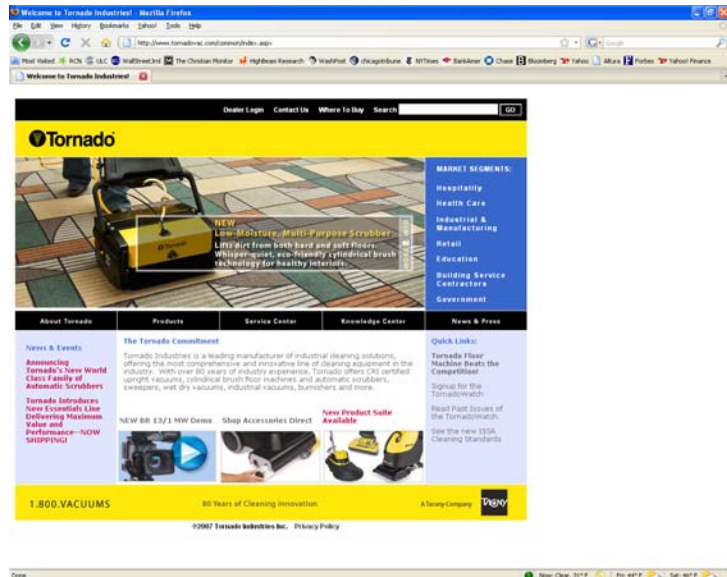


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NPTA Effective Web Sites

By Beth Pullin

Long gone are the days when having a Web presence—let alone a significant Web presence—was something only major companies and organizations could consider. In today's business environment, having a Web presence is a must. Because an effective website has proven to be such a vital marketing tool, not having one or having an outdated one borders on foolish, especially with the likelihood of a difficult economic road ahead.



“A website should always be viewed as a reflection of the company or organization behind it,” says Robert Kravitz, former Web content manager for ISSA and Global Supply Net, a jansan-focused Web portal. “See it as your storefront for the world.”

An attractive, easy-to-navigate, and easy-to-understand website is like having an attractive window display, encouraging visitors to come inside, according to Kravitz. With considerable thought and planning, a company can create a website that reflects its breadth, vision, and commitment to its customers.

Additionally, a company should always view its website as a “living, breathing thing,” says Kravitz. “The Web has been changing rather dramatically in recent years. A site introduced four or five years ago that has never been revamped may look and feel very dated to today's visitor.”

This is why many companies dedicate someone or an entire department, depending on the size of the firm, solely to updating the current site and keeping abreast of trends and new directions that they can incorporate into a future site. A site that adds new content, pictures, images, and “bells and whistles” on a regular basis is dynamic and reflects a company that is growing, moving forward, and, for the visitor, someone to consider doing business with, Kravitz explains.

In order for a company website to be effective, especially as a marketing tool, Kravitz says that companies must follow tried-and-true Web guidelines that have proven their value over the years. Some of these include:

- Whether designing a new site or revising a current one, take a look at your competitors' websites and see what you like and dislike, what appears to be effective or ineffective; while you do not want to copy another site, with this exploration you can get ideas and a sense of direction that can prove very valuable when designing your own site.
- Make sure you have a thorough understanding of what your company's website is going to promote or sell; an effective e-commerce site will promote the company behind the site as well as the products sold.
- Developing a visually appealing site is always the goal but can be very subjective. Concentrate on designing the site so that it reflects the type of customers you wish to attract. A young demographic will want “cool” images and flash animation, while an older or more business-focused visitor may see these things as distractions and a reason *not* to do business with you. Instead, for these visitors you should create a site that has a slightly larger font size, short paragraphs and messages to hold the visitor's attention, a more formal or traditional presentation, along with bullet points.
- Have a consistent look throughout the website; this applies to the colors selected, navigation tools, page style, and so on.

Never add new pages with a different format to an older site; it's better to update the entire site.

- Make sure the site is user-friendly. Make it easy to purchase products or get more information on a product; a customer's interaction with a website, especially when it comes to product selection and purchases, must be seamless and as effortless as possible.

“Another consideration is speed,” says Kravitz. “Have the Web designer analyze the entire site as to how quickly its content downloads, how fast it is to navigate, and its overall performance speed. A slow site usually translates into slow sales.”

Sounds Easy, But . . .

Dave Burbrink, vice president of B O X Packaging, Inc., which provides marketing support to packaging and jansan distributors, agrees that an effective e-commerce Web presence is imperative for all businesses, including those in the paper and jansan industry. “It’s the way people conduct business nowadays, and it’s just expected,” he says. “And this is especially true with younger customers.”

This last statement was brought home for him personally when his 28-year-old son and his girlfriend recently bought a puppy. “They bought it online,” he says. “I would never have even considered that, but my son did not think anything of it.”

However, Burbrink says that many distributors simply do not have the time or funds or are ill-equipped to launch, update, and maintain an effective website. That is why many have turned to companies like his. Boxpartners.com builds distributor websites that allow distributors a number of ways to control and personalize their sites but are tied to a central website that actually maintains all the thousands of SKUs, has hacker protection, allows for credit card transactions, as well as several other features.

“What we are doing is providing our distributors with an effective Web presence and [online] marketing tool so that their customers can re-order products online, update orders, and even buy new products they have never selected before, without all the time and expense of

managing a website themselves,” Burbrink says. “For many distributors, it can be extremely difficult to manage a business and an effective e-commerce website at the same time.”

However, Burbrink emphasizes that a Web presence cannot replace sales calls or personal interaction, no matter how effective the site. “Ultimately, the site makes it easy for customers to order products,” he says, “but it can never replace the personal interaction that starts, builds, and maintains the customer relationship.”

Manufacturers: Different Needs and Direction

Studies indicate that, on average, most manufacturers' websites undergo a major redesign every two to three years. Although the websites developed by manufacturers must follow many of the same guidelines as those for distributors and most all other e-commerce websites in order to be effective, manufacturers often have different goals and requirements that they need their sites to address.

For instance, while many paper and jansan manufacturers want to promote the features and benefits of their products to end customers, their target audience may actually be their distributors around the country and around the world. But marketing to distributors can prove complicated for a manufacturer, especially if it wants to promote a specific product in a specific area of the country or products and services that are tailored to a specific industry segment, group of distributors, or end customers.

“To reach these audiences, we have been experimenting with customized content marketing,” says Jolynn Kennedy, marketing manager for Tornado, a manufacturer of professional cleaning equipment and tools. “It’s similar to the print inserts [that] magazines distribute just to their readers in the Midwest, for example, for advertisers that want to target a certain income group or demographic, but it is done online instead.”

Kennedy adds that there are times when a manufacturer finds it necessary to segment distributors or end customers into groups and to match those groups with specific products that meet their needs. “Essentially it helps us ‘map’ our audience,” she says, “and we

believe it will help us build customer loyalty and help brand the Tornado name with more end-user customers.”

Both Burbrink and Kennedy agree with Kravitz that websites are “living, breathing things” and will continue to change and evolve in the coming years. “It’s not a question of *will* the Web evolve but just how fast things are going to change,” says Kennedy. “It used to be companies went through fairly predictable evolutionary cycles of growing, introducing products, changing marketing directions, and so on. But everything online is constantly moving, and distributors and manufacturers have no choice but to try their best to keep up and take advantage of it.”

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