

Web of Influence

By Les Lovoy

Whether you're embarking on a nationwide hunt for the perfect gift for a loved one, searching for an attorney to handle an unexpected legal dilemma or digging through a mountain of e-mails 20 times a day, we all have seen the good, bad and the ugly of today's internet.

The growing interest and availability of the worldwide web has proven both a blessing and a curse for today's businesses. Unless you've been hiding under the proverbial rock for the last fifteen years or so, you have read and seen reports on the necessity of a business to create a web site. It may seem easy and simple enough. But, once you scratch through the initial surface of this web site business, you'll find layers on top of layers, which offer a myriad of choices, benefits, trap doors and challenges.

The first question business owners ask themselves is; "Why do I need a web site at all?" In addition to the pressure of "not having a web site today is like not having a business card," look at the facts:

- Two out of three adults have some sort of internet access
- The internet is the quickest, adaptable technology today. Between checking e-mail and surfing the web, people spend around 8 hours a week on the internet.
- People are spending \$20 billion a quarter on items sold through the internet.

OK. Let's assume you're convinced that you need a web site, or you have one that is several years old and needs serious updating. Should your web site merely be an electronic version of your marketing print material? Do you need it to be an active marketing tool? Does your site need to be optimized? (More about that later!) These are just a few of the questions you need to ask yourself before you either create a new site, or are in the process of replenishing an old one.

According to Kevin Katechis, president of Net Leverage (www.netleverage.net), a local firm that custom designs web sites and creates an array of digital tools for those sites, a companies largest challenge is not be re-active simply because their competitors have a site. "A lot of companies feel pressured to create a site because their competition has one," he explains. "So, they find someone who can do it inexpensively, without taking the time to determine its goals and how it fits into the company's business and marketing plan."

Katechis has been studying the pros and cons of web sites and internet technology for a number of years. He sits on the board of the Alabama Information Technology Association, he is a board member of Technology Birmingham and he is a member of the Internet Professionals Society of America.

“There are so many reasons why people are using the internet these days,” Katechis said. “The top reason is e-mail. From there, people use it for news and information, product research, shopping, and pursuing their hobbies.”

Due to all of these usages and more, a company must seek the advice of professionals who are experts in the art, science and craft of creating the web site, which is best suited for your business and the products or services it provides. The first place to start is to look at your total business and/or marketing plan and determine how your site fits into the overall strategy.

“Today, there are a lot of businesses that created sites four or five years ago when a lot of businesses found the internet useful by transforming their print material into a web site,” Katechis explained. “And, there is a lot of value to that. It saves on printing and mailing or delivery costs, and theoretically millions of people can look at it millions of miles away, any time of the day or night.”

However useful these sites, many of these same companies are going back to their old sites and are re-visiting their usefulness. One such business is Robert F. Lewis, PC, a local law firm. Their initial site (www.lewis-attorneys.com) was created approximately five years ago. Like so many others, it was simply an electronic version of their printed marketing material. Over the last two years, they have worked diligently to update it so that it can be an active marketing tool for them.

“Through our research, we found that more and more people, from all over the country, are using the internet to search for attorneys,” explained Jon Lewis. “For that reason, we decided to make some significant changes to our site.”

The firm hired a local advertising/marketing company, which gave the site a totally different and updated look. In addition, they have included constantly changing content, such as updated newsletters and links to other sites, which offer current information that would interest their visitors. The law firm, through the marketing agency, has also hired a consulting firm that specializes in making sure that attorney sites are seen by thousands of potential clients from around the country.

One of the challenges that Lewis found is the one many companies are struggling with—optimization. Optimization refers to the process of creating a site, both from the creative and the technical end, so that it will appear at the top of the list of search engines, once someone types an appropriate search term.

An example. You sell or produce widgets in Birmingham. Someone in Wisconsin is looking for someone who does just that. He pulls up a search engine, such as Google, and types “Widgets in Birmingham.” You want your site to be in the top five names listed.

How does this happen? First, a quick tutorial on search engines. They are similar to an index in the back of a book. You find detailed subject matter based on a few key words

or phrases. The search engines themselves scour thousands of sites and find the ones they feel have the most relevance to particular search terms.

Sounds simple enough? Not so fast. There's a catch. The search engines are constantly changing their definition of "relevance." At one time, it may be how much information you have to offer on a particular subject. A short time later, it may be how many reciprocal links a site offers. It can be frustrating because the search engines don't tell anyone when and why they change it. A company needs to hire someone to stay on top of it, almost on a daily basis.

Are you wondering if all this effort is worth the time, energy and money? Know this. Only 40 percent of web sites are optimized. So, more than likely, your competition has a site that doesn't appear at the top of any search engine list. With optimization, yours will.

In addition to creating a new site, which includes dynamic content, and optimizing that site, another useful internet strategy is to become associated with a site, that is already optimized and that already has a track record for offering businesses exposure to potential customers and clients.

If one is looking for a prime example of such a site, one does not have to look any further than al.com. Launched in 1997, al.com is a subsidiary of Advance Publications of New York. Advance Publications also owns *Conde Nast Magazines* (*Glamour*, *Self*, *New Yorker*, *Architectural Digest*, etc.), as well as many newspapers across the country including *The Birmingham News*, *Huntsville Times* and *Mobile Register*. All one has to do is click on al.com to see how it's done right.

They started off with a very simple premise. Create a site that provides useful and pertinent content to each viewer, while offering businesses the opportunity to reach those viewers.

"al.com was created to be yet another vehicle for companies to reach their target audience," explains Cindy Martin, president/CEO. "And, I have to admit, we have been able to do an excellent job at just that."

Prior to joining al.com, Martin served as vice-president for the search engine Magellan. There she was responsible for sales, marketing and business development.

According to Martin, 60 percent of all companies in Alabama are on the internet in some shape, form or fashion. al.com offers them the opportunity to reach thousands of valuable internet viewers in a cost-effective manner, while offering viewers a wealth of information on all things Alabama.

Through a very assertive, constant advertising campaign and good word-to-mouth, al.com has 650,000 unique visitors each month. These are individual people who are potentially looking at the site each month. In addition to their growing number of visitors, AL.com has received national recognition. Neilson, the national media ranking company has recently published a survey that found that out of thousands of web sites, AL.com is in the Top 20 of local internet sites in the country.

“Martin is obviously proud of al.com’s continuing success. “We offer businesses the opportunity to present themselves to a client base that generally has a college degree, has greater discretionary income than most and who travels more than the average person,” Martin explained.

Another reason for al.com’s success is the continual evolution of the site. “We are always thinking of ways of giving our advertisers a choice and enhancing a viewer’s experience on our site,” Martin said. “For advertisers, we have several options from banners, to single lines which link to their site. For our viewers, we offer current sources of information, archival, historical information, videos, and audio recordings. We want to be ‘the source’ of information for all.”

The net/net is that there are no easy answers. In fact, this article may have created more questions than answers. Create a site, or re-vamp a current one or not? If so, do you want an electronic brochure or an interactive marketing tool with dynamic content? Do you advertise it, or allow future clients or customers to find it through word of mouth? Optimize or not? All of these are questions that must be answered. However, the most important question is: How will your web site help your company reach its strategic goals. Once you’ve answered that question, you’re more than half way there.