

The Way of the Web

Twelve tips for getting Web site visitors and keeping them coming back for more.

Okay. You've been convinced. You've gritted your teeth and decided to spend the money to launch a company Web site. Everybody from your teenage propellerhead to the girl in the mail room and the salesman in the flashy suit who gave you "such a deal" on Web site services has promised that your site will be the best thing that's happened to your business since the advent of CNC machines.

But you've been around the block a couple of times. Nothing is as simple or easy as the true believers make this sound. Once you're out on the Web, how do you make your considerable investment of time, effort and dollars really pay off?

Just Building It Doesn't Mean They'll Come

There's a lot to building a successful site, but fundamental to making cyberspace work for you are two basic questions you should be asking yourself: How do I get people to visit my site in the first place, and, once they've seen it, how can I get them to come back again?

The answers are not complex.

Promote your site everywhere and often. This first rule may seem obvious, and it is—so obvious that it frequently gets overlooked. Web users may be on the cutting edge of technology, but, generally speaking, they're not psychic. They can't visit your site if they don't know it's there. Be sure your online presence is mentioned in all your corporate literature. Display your URL (Internet address) everywhere you can—your stationery, your business cards, your print advertising. Your URL should be added to any display of your company name, address and phone numbers. Notify your



The Lycos search engine opening screen.

best customers that you've gone online by mail or fax. Send out news releases announcing it to relevant trade publications. Don't forget to add your site address to your listing in professional or business directories and to promote it at your booth at trade shows.

Register your site with all the major search engines. Web sites like Lycos, AltaVista and Infoseek make it their business to cruise the Web and index its contents so people looking for informa-

tion on particular subjects can find it. Take the time to notify these "search engines" of the existence of your site so they can include it in their indexes. The service is free, and you can register right online.

Spend the time to tinker with the wording on your pages so that yours will be among the first to come up under particular topics. Usually search results are listed in groups of ten, and your goal is to get as close to the top of the list as you can. This will take some persistence and considerable vigilance. The rules search engines use to categorize sites seem to change constantly, and every search engine has its own criteria. On the other hand, search engines make frequent repeat visits to sites, so just because your company comes up as number 537 under a category this week doesn't mean it's doomed to stay there forever.

The important thing to keep in mind is that search engines are only a backup to your direct promotion. The easiest and fastest way to get to a particular site on the Internet is to have the URL right in front of you. See to it that anyone you think might be interested in your site knows how to find it directly.

THE NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

Welcome to our newest column, *online@geartek*. Since the Internet seems to be the Next Wave in doing business, even for "mature" industries like gear manufacturing, we want to do what we can to keep you, our readers, up to date on what's happening online. This column will appear from time to time covering various ways in which the Internet can help you promote your gear business. We won't be a substitute for one of the plethora of good computer magazines out there covering the technical aspects of Web site building, e-mail maintenance and other arcana. What we hope to do is help relate this new (and to many of us, intimidating) world of cyberspace to our real lives and real businesses. Let us know how we're doing. We welcome your suggestions and comments.

Explore directory sites. Think of these as mega-sites. They play host to the Web sites of other businesses. Examples are Industry.Net or Industrylink or The Gear Industry Home Page™. The virtue of a directory site is that it helps clear away some of the clutter on the Internet. This can be an advantage to people looking for your site, because if it's found on a directory site, they don't

have to search through the whole Web to find it. On the other hand, access to these sites is free to users, but not to those with Web sites. Space on a directory site can be quite expensive, and the cost will have to be added to whatever else you've spent to get online.

Some of them also require users to "qualify" to use the site, much in the same way controlled circulation maga-

zines require subscribers to "qualify" before receiving free subscriptions. This restriction cuts both ways for your Web page. The "hits" you get might be from people more seriously interested in your product than the casual surfer, but the requirement puts a wall between you and potential visitors to your site. Many Internet users are reluctant to give out even the most general information online if they're just browsing, so they may not bother to check you out.

Repeat Business

Getting people to your site once is only the beginning. The real measure of Internet success is getting users to come back again and again. The World Wide Web is the essence of an "emerging technology." We're all learning how to best use it as we go along, but some strategies for getting the most out of the Web are becoming clear.

Think paradigm shift. The Web is *not* an advertising medium as we have traditionally understood that term. Don't think of it that way. If all you really want to do is get your company name in front of your customers, there are more effective (and possibly cheaper and easier) ways to do it.

Instead, think of your Internet site as a dynamic, flexible, 24-hour-a-day customer service outpost. Make a list of all the things that you could do from your Web site. For a start, you can provide information for your customers, answer their questions, sell products, keep them informed of important corporate developments and provide technical support. If you can think of a customer-related need, there's a good chance there's a way to address it from your Web page.

Be clear about your goals. Given the flexibility and potential reach of the Web, it's important to be very clear about what you want to accomplish. Just because you can do a great many things on the Web, doesn't mean you should do them all—at least not right away. Prioritize your goals. It's better to do a few things well and add other things later when you're more comfortable with your site and its technologies than to do everything badly. Web users are also becoming more and more sophisticated every day.

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They'll drop an amateurish or unfocused site like a bad habit.

Be clear about who your audience is. Think "customer" not "company" when planning material for your site. What do they want? How can your page help them get it? What do you want them to do? How does your page encourage them to do it? People come to Web sites for what they can get out of them. Your ultimate goal in planning a site is to make it so

useful and important to its users that they don't want to be without the information and services they can get from it.

Update often. Nothing spells death on the Web faster than stale material. Update your page regularly. If daily or weekly updates are not possible, certainly update monthly. You don't have to redo the entire page, but you should certainly add new items or delete out-of-date ones as often as you can. Once your

site is set up, changing the material on it is not that difficult or time-consuming. Set up a schedule and keep to it. Help return users by labelling what's new on your site. Remember that your users are paying for their Internet time. It's only courteous to point them in the direction of the new things on your site so they can get to them quickly.

Make your site truly interactive. Just posting information to be read is not interactivity. Boxes to fill in, e-mail forms, hyperlinks to other sites, games to play, contests to enter, question-and-answer forums, all involve users directly and keep them interested and coming back for more.

Provide information users can't get elsewhere. Remember what we said earlier about making your site a necessity for users. You've got to make it worth their while to call up your site. Timely, interesting, original, useful information, plus graphics that don't take forever to load, will bring your customers back to your site again and again.

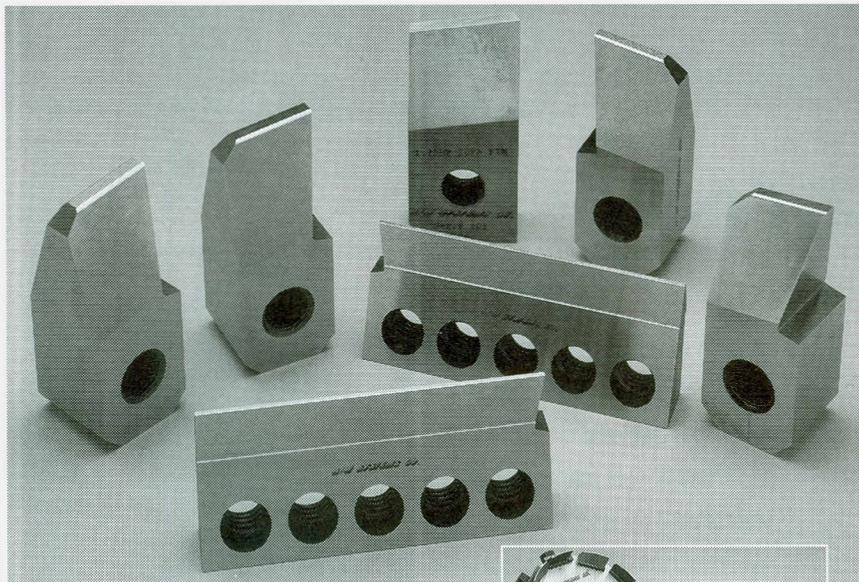
Troubleshoot your site on a regular basis. Assign a variety of people to call up your site from their own computers at home. Make sure they're using a variety of browsers. Not all browsers work alike. Your site may load flawlessly on one and be full of glitches on another. You need to identify trouble spots and eliminate them.

Find out how long it takes the average reader to load your site. Have your testers check to make sure all your forms and hyperlinks work the way you want them to on their personal machines. Ask them to notify your webmaster of any glitches in the system *immediately*. It's a real turn-off to repeatedly call up a site only to get an error message of one kind or another.

Pay attention to the graphics. Your site is your company's representative in cyberspace. You want it to look as good as it can. Busy graphics that serve no purpose and take forever to load are a bad idea. So are garish colors that are hard on the eye. (Just because your computer can use 16 million colors doesn't mean they should all appear on your Web site.) On the other hand, a dull boring site implies that your company is

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also dull and boring—not the message you want to convey.

Use sound and animation sparingly, if at all. Yes, some pretty remarkable technology is out there that can turn your site into an animated video, complete with a sound track if that's what you want to do. It may not be the best use of your resources however. Many Web users don't have state-of-the-art machines that can use this glitzy technology, and all your time, effort and

12 WAYS TO MAKE YOUR WEB SITE THE BEST IT CAN BE

- Promote your site everywhere and often. You can't remind people of your URL too often.

- Register with all the major search engines. These are the first place many Internet users go when looking for information.

- Explore directory sites. These mega-sites can help direct interested users to your home page.

- Think paradigm shift. Your Web presence is not the same as an old-fashioned ad. Don't limit your thinking with this comparison.

- Be clear about your goals. Know exactly what you want to accomplish before you start to design your site.

- Be clear about your audience. Know what they want and figure out how your site can help them get it.

- Update often. Stale content is like stale bread—nobody wants it.

- Make your site truly interactive. Use the power of the Web to encourage direct responses from visitors.

- Provide information users can't get elsewhere. Timely, original and exclusive information will keep users coming back for more.

- Troubleshoot your site. Make sure your site is glitch-free. Web users will give up on you if getting into your site is too much hassle.

- Pay attention to the graphics. Make sure they're clear and logical. Don't clutter your site with needless glitz that wastes cyberspace and takes forever to load.

- Check out the competition. Research other sites. See how other sites handle certain problems. Imitate and adapt for your own purposes.

expense will be lost on them. These bells and whistles also consume disk space in huge quantities at an alarming rate and take an age to load. How many visitors to your site will lose patience and leave before they get to your cute video of meshing gears?

Your site should also be easy to use. It should follow some kind of clear visual logic. Users should be able to go to the places on your site they want to be quickly and easily. Buttons and menus should be easy to read and understandable.

Getting the look and feel of your site exactly the way you want it is not easy. Beware of falling into the trap of thinking you can buy a \$49.95 "web designer" program and have the receptionist design your site in her spare time. It will be worth it in the long run to pay someone with experience in Web design to provide at least your basic "look" and templates for your pages.

Check out the competition. The World Wide Web is one of the easiest places to do this without having to put on a false moustache and a trench coat or disguising your voice. Spend some time surfing the Net. Take note of the sites you like. See what they do and how they do it. Then adapt the idea to your own business.

Go back to those goals you set for your site. Find other sites with similar goals and see how they achieve them. How do other sites build name recognition? Handle customer service requests? Provide product information? Fill orders? Remember that just because your favorite site is promoting a very different business doesn't mean you can't adopt some of its strategies.

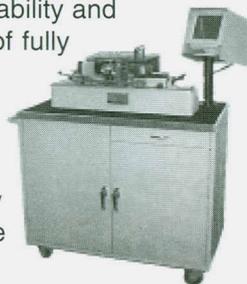
Launching a Web site is in one sense no different from any other new business venture. It requires research, planning ahead, looking out for and avoiding the pitfalls and some hard, concentrated thinking. Do that, and success will follow. ⚙

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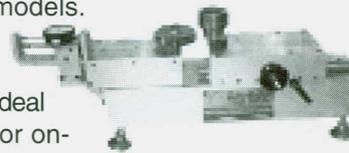
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