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Blogs? Facebook? Twitter? Give your Web site an edge

Posted on March 25th, 2009 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



Gene Allen's column last month on the nuances of Web-based dealer marketing was solid and serves as a great segue to my focus this month: "Web 2.0 and Beyond."

I totally agree that today's Web enthusiast is no longer the young, penniless and fad-driven techno-freak. The Internet has become the preferred research platform for all demographic groups, including the most affluent.

Everyone in the marine marketplace should embrace the technology, take the time to understand it and use it to maximize return on investment. In my view, the Web has become the single most important marketing vehicle in the tool kit, especially in today's tumultuous economy.

At the Miami International Boat Show, Marine Marketers of America hosted a forum featuring four Web experts, all working in the marine industry. The panelists spent more than an hour sharing their techniques.

Jim Rhodes of Rhodes Communications, working in conjunction with moderator Sally Helme of The Sailing Company, compiled an excellent list of questions to pose to the pros. The panel consisted of Glen Justice of Madmariner.com, Courtney Chalmers of Boattrader.com, Leonard Boord of Theboaters.com, and Jared Jester of Jester Communications.

I learned more in an hour here than in my own research during the last year.

One of the key points made by the panelists, which was also mentioned in Allen's column, is the need for testing of Web campaigns, which is not widely practiced in marine circles. Unlike other marketing mediums, which can be costly to test, the Web offers tremendous flexibility to turn and test on a dime.

Madmariner's Justice believes marine marketers should utilize the A-B testing method (one option versus another) in the initial phase of a campaign before launching a major marketing initiative.

Boord of Theboaters.com agrees. He says Facebook has approximately 150 million users, and testing of diversity ads can be developed and conducted efficiently and effectively in this venue. He says an ad can be developed for Facebook in as few as five minutes, and then immediately tested in the marketer's demographic of choice.

Chalmers agrees that Web site metrics should be defined and validated as a testing method, but the key, she contends, is to “determine how all these relate and result in a conversion [a desired outcome].” The bottom line for Web marketers is to understand “what path led to the conversion.”

To summarize, testing and defining analytics should be an integral part of overall Web strategy. It’s no longer good enough to just have a functional Web site – we must better study and understand the interface and path to conversion so we’re very clear about what works, and what doesn’t.

Another topic was search engine optimization and the need for strategic keyword integration. Web content obviously impacts search engine results and site ranking, so the goal is to more effectively use keywords, including the more detailed, specific longer-tail keywords. The panelists agreed that Web marketers must commit to frequently updating content so it is more dynamic and compelling – good for bringing site visitors back and good for the search engines. I believe too many companies exert a lot of initial horsepower launching a Web site but then let it stagnate.

One recent development that has gained a lot of traction is blogging. Boord cited some pretty amazing statistics: There are 133 million blogs in existence, 146 million people who read blogs on a daily basis and 900,000 blog posts a day. Some 79 percent of active daily Internet users claim to read a blog. Wow! Does this get your attention? It sure gets mine.

To blog or not to blog is a question for many these days. It’s important to understand the benefits of blogging. Our experts agree that if you have knowledge to share, this is a terrific forum through which to build a loyal following.

Blogs, says Boord, give you the opportunity to attract an audience, answer questions and address developing issues. They also give your company added depth and dimension, providing the all-important “human touch,” says Justice.

Sounds like a great idea, right? But before you rush out and designate a company blogger, some words to the wise. Justice notes that the Web landscape is littered with abandoned blogs, which he claims do more harm than good for a company.

“One has to be committed to the development, maintenance and use of a blog. Ask yourself before you start: Who will write it? Who will update it? Who will respond to inquiries or comments?” These are all critical questions.

If you’re going to blog, dedicate the necessary resources, including experts who have the skills and the time to develop the blog, post regularly and respond frequently. The best blogs are updated daily; the absolute minimum is weekly. My opinion: if you can’t commit the resources to do it right, don’t do it at all.

It was no surprise to me that social marketing was a priority among the panel. Social networks like Facebook or Twitter, as well as marine-specific venues, allow large populations to huddle together and share everything from a slice of their lives with friends, to opinions and views, to a common love and interest in activities like boating. Justice says people are organizing their lives around social networking on sites like Facebook. “It’s as common today as e-mail and can’t be ignored,” he says.

Chalmers agrees that for marine professionals and their businesses to be vital and relevant, they should be actively engaged in social networking initiatives with other like professionals. I concur. I’m an avid Facebook and LinkedIn enthusiast and know firsthand their power.

So what’s the hottest thing today in Web marketing, and what will become the “in thing” in the next six to

12 months?

Jester points to social marketing and thinks Internet-delivered brand advertising on hand-held mobile devices also is hot.

Boord says Twitter is exploding, with 1.1 billion “tweets” posted in a single day. He predicts Twitter will continue its rapid growth through 2009 and into 2010.

Chalmers also supports the social marketing platform as one to watch but gives the nod to Web marketing customization as a top trend for the future.

Justice agrees with all that, but his final advice is worth repeating: “One does not have to jump on every hot trend or the next hottest thing. Find out what works best for you and pick core strategies, and go with what works.”

For those of us dedicated to marketing excellence, the Web offers a plethora of fast-developing opportunities that demand our constant attention. I agree with Justice that we have to weigh the resources, selectively test, and then choose what we’re going to do ... and then do it exceptionally well.

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