

Is Your Website Like a Persuasive Salesman or a Rambling Lunatic?

For many industries, gone are the days when the inside salesperson was the first point of contact for potential clients. Now, more often than not, people searching for your products or services will go first to your website – your on-call-24-hours, inside salesguy to the world. Is yours a persuasive, charismatic representative of your company? Or a rambling, disheveled lunatic?

When your salesforce takes a call, do they breathlessly spew out every fact they know about your company, from your investor relations to the jobs available in your marketing department? Probably not – and neither should your website. One of the most common problems we see in corporate websites is the inclusion of overwhelming numbers of links and dense blocks of text on the very first page. This untargeted approach suggests that the company has no idea why anyone would visit their site, so they've gone ahead and thrown everything up to let the brave sift through it. Surprisingly, a large number of companies commissioning websites haven't thought about their purpose for having one – they've heard they ought to, so they want to. Before beginning the web development process, ask yourself some questions: Who am I trying to attract with my website? What do I want them to do once they're there? What kinds of questions do people usually ask us? If you want people to know that 241 stores now stock your SuperPooperLitterScooper, have information about your product and a store finder right out front. Descriptions of your manufacturing process or your corporate culture can live deeper in the site. Likewise, if 95% of the people who call you simply want to know the address of your headquarters, a link to that information should be readily apparent from all screens. Like a good salesperson, your website should anticipate a client's questions and concerns, and guide her to the information she requires to make a purchase.

How quickly would you fire a salesman who insisted on singing a 60-second ditty to your clients before he'd let them buy your product? It sounds ridiculous, yet many companies spend thousands of dollars on animated introductions to their sites that do nothing but hold people back from getting to the information they've come for. Sure, Flash animation can be a big burst of the "Wow Factor" and a classy way to visually express your tagline or corporate identity. But it's most effective when it's embedded into a site, with the navigation readily apparent. The number one rule of sales: Never make it harder for a client to buy from you!

If you ran a Lexus dealership, would you hire a salesman whose 15-year-old son cut his hair and sewed his suit, the way he taught himself in his spare time? Probably not, yet a surprising number of high-end companies have sites created by inexperienced friends and family. Conversely, if you ran a used-car lot with rock-bottom prices, would you hang chandeliers in your showroom and encourage your salesman to wear fine Italian suits? Again, probably not – people might assume you were expensive. What kind of an image is your salesman-on-the-web portraying? Is the design working against your message? Does it express your corporate identity, or is it interchangeable with the sites of your competitors – or worse, with sites in a completely different industry? At the start of the development process, write down a list of adjectives to describe your company's style.

This will help to clarify what direction the design should go in, both for yourself and for your web designer.

The landscape of the internet has changed dramatically in the last few years, rapidly evolving from an insignificant novelty to an invaluable mainstream medium. Thinking of your website as an extension of your salesforce will help your company to build a more effective on-line presence.

And for the love of Mike, keep that rambling lunatic in IT where he belongs!

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