

Untangling the Web: Keys to Maintaining an Effective Online Presence"

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According to ThomasNet's Industry Market Barometer, nearly 90 percent of all industrial buyers go directly to the web when looking for information on products and services. It's no wonder that nearly every product manufacturer or services provider has its own website. However, this has become as standard as the business card. Simply having a website is not enough to stand apart from the herd. In order to not only contend, but thrive in today's ultra-competitive marketplace, industrial manufacturers need to understand the importance of having a strong, positive online presence.

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What is an online presence? More than just maintaining a website, online presence is the profile of information that results from a customer or prospect's search on Google, or any other search engine. The components boil down to four key areas: the corporate website, online media, social media, and digital tools and technology (i.e. search engine optimization). These vehicles amplify corporate and product messaging to position products and services as critical business assets that solve problems within the industries and markets they serve.

As decision-makers continue to diversify the way they seek information, a robust online presence can help reach targeted customers and differentiate products and services – driving sales development and business growth.

I. Website

Countless companies invest a significant amount of money on an impressive facade. Marble columns, plush leather seats, and notable artwork are common sights in many lobbies and waiting areas. While an impressive-looking storefront is important, a website can say a lot more about a company and its products/services. Today's customers are going online, bypassing the well-appointed seating area and heading directly for the product showroom. As a result, the website is the first – and sometimes only – face that many existing and potential customers see. Does your website provide them with the information they are looking for?



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An effective website provides visitors with information most likely to inspire them to act, and can include unique product performance benefits, applications data, and customer testimonials. This information should be as straightforward as possible and easy to find.

Finally, it must allow customers to act. Does your website provide the information necessary to take things to the next level? Whether that means reaching out to a sales representative for additional information, or making an actual purchasing decision, this is vital to driving business.

II. Online Media

The proliferation of online media has amplified the power of communication, making it more important than ever to develop engaging content. First and foremost, strong visibility in the online media serves to support and qualify company or product claims and information on a company's website.

Today's web-savvy surfers do not always arrive directly on a company's online doorstep. In many cases, they are using keyword searches, collecting general information about you and your competitors. Online media placements also help enhance the depth and complexity of keyword search results, increasing the probability of appearing in a targeted online search for information.

Online media presence can include round-up articles – comprehensive pieces written by the editors of important publications that highlight key players in an industry, as well as feature articles on general issues, and case studies that highlight best practices and make a compelling business case. This vital area of one's online presence increases the overall visibility and industry awareness of a company and its products/services. It also ensures that a company is directly attached to industry issues and ongoing discussion, positioning it as a thought leader. This, in turn, sets you apart from your competitors, driving website traffic and inserting potential customers into the purchasing pipeline.

III. Social Media

In an ever-evolving online universe, social media can be just as important as conventional online trade media outlets. Many B-to-B purchasing decisions are heavily influenced by peer-based information, or in some cases, confirmation. As a result, information sourced through various social media outlets can be extremely effective. For example, blogs can be an effective way to reach out to targeted audiences, including existing and potential customers. There are a number of reputable industry blogs out there and many companies even create their own. Often attached to a company's website, a blog allows control of messaging aimed at key stakeholders. Blogs are also a good way to increase overall transparency and spark discussion in real-time. With that in mind, it is important to monitor any discussion threads and keep blog content as up-to-date as possible.

LinkedIn, the popular professional networking site, is another social media outlet that companies can use to connect with customers. Not just a repository for professional contact



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information, LinkedIn can be used to post relevant announcements, such as product announcements, new hires and industry updates. With more than 75 million registered users and professional-specific, LinkedIn can be an appropriate and effective use of social media for B-to-B communication.

IV. Digital Tools and Technology

While constantly changing and often confusing, it is important to take a closer look at some of the other online tools and technology available. Something we call “electronic PR”, or ePR, is an effective way to generate interest in a company and its products, driving traffic to its corporate website. ePR consists of link building through posting relevant content strategically throughout the web. For example, a company might post a relevant case history that highlights a specific market on key industry portals, and discussion boards. This increases the overall online exposure and industry awareness of a company or product, ultimately driving qualified business leads to a specific website.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is another popular method of increasing a company’s online visibility. SEO can involve tailoring specific website content, along with its coding, to increase the amount of search engine exposure a website gets. For example, a company promoting a new product or service and utilizing SEO will have tagged a few common industry terms on its website pertaining to that product, service or target market. When an online user enters these very specific search terms, a link to that company will appear among the more relevant choices, increasing the chances of more traffic to the website in search of in-depth information on a specific product or service.

With the growing popularity and functionality of personal electronics, there are a number of multimedia options a company can use to communicate information to existing and potential customers, such as podcasts and videocasts. Podcasts allow digital information to be downloaded to one’s MP3 player. Videocasts are podcasts with a video component, making downloadable information more engaging. Imagine a downloadable video case history or customer testimonial with an actual end-user sharing information. Both podcasts and videocasts are excellent ways to talk about technical matters, translating the direct benefits of a given technology into tangible business value.

Finally, while not as cutting-edge as downloadable video files, direct e-mail campaigns can also be useful in providing additional exposure. Timed to coincide with an industry event, such as a tradeshow, direct e-mail can help generate pre-show buzz about a company or product, driving business qualified leads to a company’s tradeshow booth for more information and allowing the sales team to do their job.

Made up of an effective website, active participation with online media, and use of up-and-coming online tools and technology, a comprehensive online presence can help differentiate a company’s offerings. Combined use of available online tools can allow a company to succeed, not only strengthening its customer relationships and increasing existing market share, but also enabling entrance into new markets, establishing connections with new customers.