Tips for Email and Website Marketing

As a SCORE mentor, I talk to small business owners that represent a variety of maturity in their business. Some just have an idea, others are trying to actually start up their new business, while others have been running a business for years. One of the most common questions or concerns that I experience recently is “Dean, how can I market my service/product/business more effectively through my website and emailing?”

As a small business owner, you try to make a service/product/business so great that marketing shouldn’t matter. But it doesn’t happen that way. Marketing does matter and marketing can only do so much good and in some cases it can do damage. So I tried to pull together a list of tips for effective marketing through your website and email practices and hopefully we can learn from other mistakes or approaches.

One of the most recent, best books related to this topic that I enjoyed reading was “Reality Check Outsmarting, Outmanaging, Outmarketing Your Competition” written by Guy Kawasaki. I will share some of his thoughts with mine.

One of my pet peeves is unreadable confirmation (CAPTCHA) codes. Don’t get me wrong: I don’t support spam or robots creating accounts. A confirmation system is a good thing, but many are too difficult to read: upper versus lower case, I vs 1, and 0 versus O. My theory is that this technique is called CAPTCHA because it captures folks in an endless loop of trying to prove to a machine that you’re a human.

Required, immediate registration on your website. Requiring a new user to register and provide a modest amount of information is a reasonable request. But, do it after you’ve sucked the person in. Most sites require that registration is the first step, and this puts a barrier in front of adoption. At the very least, companies could ask for name and email address but not require it until a later time.

Long URLs. Many sites generate URLs that are longer than ninety characters. When you copy, paste, and email this URL, a line break is added, so people cannot click on it to go to the intended location.

Emails without signatures. In email lingo, a signature is text that is automatically included in every email you send. Typically, it contains your name, email address, phone numbers, and web site. This is very useful if someone wants to pick up the phone and call you or visit your website without having to ask for that information.

Windows that don't generate URLs. Have you ever wanted to point people to a page, but the page has no URL? You’ve got a window open that you want to tell someone about, but you’d have to write an essay to explain how to get that window open again.

Lack of a search function. Some sites that don’t allow people to search. This is okay for simple sites where a site map suffices, but that’s seldom the case. If your site has a site map that goes deeper than one level, it probably needs a search box.

Lack of ways to share an experience. It’s hard to make a product, service, or web site that’s so compelling that people want to share it. If you do, it's a shame when there's not an easy way for people
to spread what they like. The next time you're visiting a web site, look for buttons that say "Share this" or "Email this to a friend" and implement similar functionality.

Limiting contact to email. Don't get me wrong: I live and die by email, but there are times I want to call a company or maybe even snail mail something to it. Many companies only allow people to send an email via a web form.

Lack of feeds and email lists. When people are interested in your company, they will want to receive information about your products and services. This should be as easy as possible, meaning that you provide both email and RSS feeds for content and PR newsletters.

User names that cannot contain the '@' character. In other words, a user name cannot be your email address. I am a member of hundreds of sites. I can't remember if my user name is swanson, dswanson, deanswanson, or swanson1234. I do know what my email address is, so just let me use that as my user name.

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