

## Importance of the company website

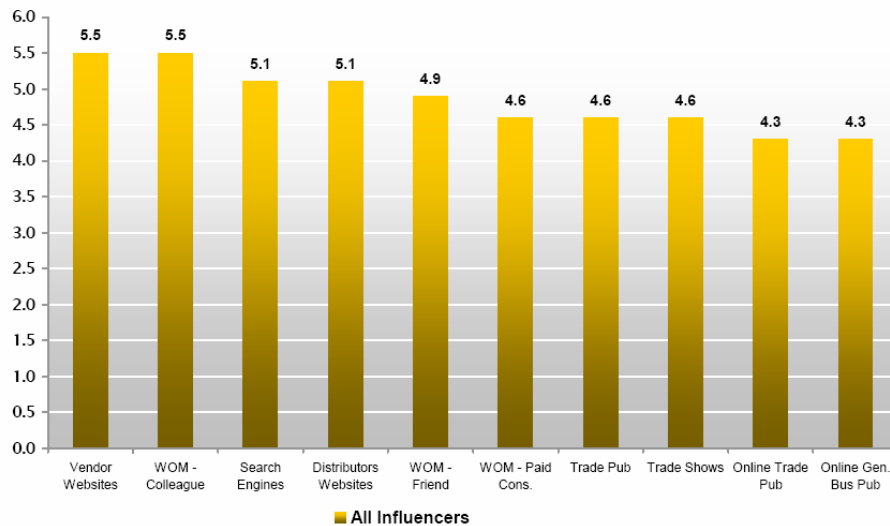
A recent survey carried out in the US by Search and usability specialists enquireo looked at the importance of the company website in the various phases of the buying cycle and it is official, the company website is now the biggest influencer of your customers, both old and new.

What is important to understand when reading this is that influencers in a marketing context can be positive or negative, never benign. What I mean by this simply is that your website is having a major influence on potential buyers of your goods and services.

If it does not exist or **does not measure up** to expectation, then that **influence is a negative** one.

I.E. No website does not mean no influence

Top Influences - Total (All Phases)



Researching costs, requirements, features, specifications etc	46%
Comparing products/services against each other	24.7%
Reading reviews about the product/service	9.6%
Purchasing a product/service	8.8%
Navigating to a particular site	6.5%
Don't know	1.5%
Other	0.8%

This survey reveals a lot about what you need to be doing on your website to make sure that it contributes positively to your sales lifecycle.

### These four items are recommended as a bare minimum

Remember however, that each industry and sector has it's own peculiarities and good research is vital before investing a lot of time and money.

1. Deep and useful information on product, pricing, support, features, specifications, availability and above all clear pricing information. The more information the better. Ideally this should be all available in both online and downloadable forms. All of this should be available without registering.
2. Comparison with other similar products on the market, positioning statements, direct feature comparison etc. Ideally this should be validated

in some way and above all it should be objective and truthful.

3. Case studies to download are a critical tool, interaction with past customers is even better

4. Detailed info about the company and it's approach to professional services, refunds, support, etc

## **What's possible for you, what's very difficult or near impossible and what is probably not even desirable.**

What is probably impossible for you is to rank number one for "web design", "SEO" or "Google" on the search engines.

Now let's take that example. if your website managed to achieve the impossible, you would probably need a lot of new kit just to keep your old web site running under the strain, you would have to delete the log files hourly and your mailbox would be receiving tens of thousands of spam and nuisance emails an hour. This would probably not be the instant road to riches you had hoped for, even it were possible.

The reason it is probably not possible is that the web is a very competitive global marketplace. Your web design business would be competing on level terms with sweatshops in developing countries, part timers in Perth and several million others. Just do a search and see how many results come back.

You could find new business in a niche though, not least a geographical niche. That's an old concept, but coming back into fashion.

Every SEO and SEM consultant in the world will promise to make your website number one for an obscure phrase that no serious potential buyer uses, but few consultants will offer you a genuine plan to acquire new business.

The role of your website will dictate a lot about how it is designed and marketed

A little homework will help you understand what the real role of your website is, how you can maximise the benefits derived from it and how to grow them organically.

Your website is a front office to the world, but much more importantly, it is also a front office to your customers and potential customers.

## **The buying process – understanding your sales cycle**

Buying/Sales cycles differ substantially whether your business is about bolts, pet feed, accountancy services or houses. Your customers will go through different stages and feel different emotions and in the business to business arena different roles will be involved at different stages in the buying cycle.

Without getting too technical, it is also common enough for sales cycles to be at odds with buying cycles. I.E Where they are at and where you think they are at are not always one and the same.

The more you know about these cycles and about the behavioural patterns and needs of the people involved, the more you can fine tune your website to support them.

Below is a standard buying cycle that can be easily adapted to represent any business with a few minor changes and I have added some valuable information to help you understand what is likely to be beneficial to your customers at a given stage in the process.

### **Awareness**

This is the first stage and it naturally includes the act of searching for products and/or suppliers to satisfy a particular need. They may have spotted your website in the past while seeking something else and bookmarked it.

They may have never heard of you, but begun to search along a theme

and eventually arrived at a link to your site and followed it. They may have heard of your company or product and tried searching on a few variants of the spelling.

They may have found you on page one of Google or on a vertical search engine or aggregator that they found on page one of Google, etc etc. Their reasons for searching may also vary from new business to needing extra suppliers, to replacing old supplier to looking for a better deal and many more. All of these factors lead to different needs and different behaviours.

There are many books written on the subject so we won't labour it. What is important to understand is that there are a great many routes to your website, there are a great many lexical or semantic routes also, E.G the user may search on need rather than product, they may search on product category or industry and narrow their search down gradually. They may start with a general search in order to learn the vocabulary and then after a couple of adjustments, arrive at your site.

There are differences in the tenacity of searchers, only a few searchers, will really stop at the first few listings in Google and make an important buying decision. These clicks are just clicks. Sales are an altogether different measure of success.

Getting users to your website is important, but only qualified users will lead to sales and ultimately, that is all that matters.

### **What influences them**

The first influence is the look of your link when they see it on a search engine or a referring website and alas, for many of them this will be the point at which you part company. If you ask them they will tell you a very different story as a number of surveys have revealed over the years, but when you sit them down and watch them the truth reveals the following:

1. Ranking (The majority of scanning appears on the top of the page. We start on the top and scan down looking for the result that appears to be the best match.

This is why the #1 organic result typically gets more than twice the click-throughs of the #2, and so on)

2. Title (We first scan the titles of the listings, very quickly looking for information indicated by a bolding of our search terms)

3. Description (If the title catches our eye, we then scan for clusters of words that appear in the description, but the fact is, there's far more scanning of titles than descriptions by the average user)

4. Brand (only if all the above factors work to attract the attention of a user, does that user have a chance to even notice the brand presented. Unless you are a Nike, it is unlikely that your brand is synonymous with what the user is looking for. If all else works correctly, then brand can "close the deal" and capture the click through)

### **What you need to do**

1. Honesty is critical. If they find an appropriate term and an interesting description and then they click through to find that your site is about something else, you will have wasted everybody's time. If you are Seth somebody and you are an SEO guru with a point to prove, click-throughs and rankings may be useful, but they won't pay your bills.

2. Make sure you are using the right vocabulary to attract the people you want, if you are erecting sheds in London, you don't want people trying to shed weight in Arkansas. You don't want to be selling software for lawyers though and missing out on attorneys. Don't be fooled by the people who will take your money to make you number one on google for "New york accountant seeking prime pad a ter in Londonne"

3. Once you have vocabulary sorted out, make sure it is used a lot in headlines, titles and other places that score well with search engines.

Make sure also that there is real, high quality, genuinely useful content to catch that user's attention and make him/her want to explore you further as a potential supplier. Make sure that your prime keywords appear on links and the descriptions that accompany links.

4. If you don't have an international brand then at least look the part, be exactly who you are, any pretence will eventually be found out and lead to disappointment. Get as many websites and blogs a you can to link to your website and make sure the links meet the high standards you have set for yourself. These inbound links are seen as recommendations and help to grow your online brand.

5. Write content or get it written and submit it for syndication, run a blog if you can and get a PR person to keep an eye on your business and capitalise on every opportunity to buy free air-time and increase your share of voice.

## Research

Generally, the research phase is when the potential buyer is learning more about the available products and suppliers and beginning to narrow down the potential candidates. At his point they are also still learning about their own needs as they discover new potential they had not been aware of and solutions that are new to them and require consideration.

During this phase they will need lots of content that helps them understand the options available to them and the parameters of their decisions.

They will building a business case, either in their minds or more formally. They will be looking for peer comment and recommendations and they will be preparing their defence of the decision should they need one in future.

Towards the end of the research phase, new individuals tend to become involved in the process. Maybe a CEO or CFO will begin to take a bigger interest and new aspects will become important.

By research stage, typically more than 50% of users are typing in the URL of known vendors and search engines have a different purpose, mostly comparison, news, blogs and other research about the vendor and product.

It may be a sobering experience to type in a few searches for your company and product and see what comes up. Would you buy form this company?

### What influences them

Online

Press recommendations

Case studies

Comparison site rankings

Vertical search rankings

Manufacturer or main dealer listings

Colleague recommendation

Offline

Recommendations

Trade show

Opt-in direct mail

### What you need to do

1. As stated in the last paragraph, the help of a PR expert will keep you in the online press and keep the messages complimentary.

Good case studies covering all your key market segments will help a lot.

2. Make submissions to online reviewers and vertical search engines and keep your site as high up their rankings as possible.

3. Network with complimentary businesses and seek back links and recommendations from them.

4. Make full use of suppliers, main dealers and trade bodies to help you demonstrate your credibility, make sure you have great product.

5. Differentiate your product and company from those that are seemingly identical and especially form your main competitors by finding and

shouting your USP.

6. When the time is right make contact with your potential customer and keep in touch with tasteful and useful mail-shots , newsletters or telephone conversations.

7. Make your site a hub of links ot other useful sites so that your visitor is attracted to return to it and recommend it.

8. Make it easy to recommend your site

## Negotiation

At this stage, your potential customer is negotiating for the best possible deal. You have been short listed and your product is up to scratch. The customer is now looking for the best possible deal in terms of delivery, support, etc and of course the best financial deal he/she can get.

### What influences them

1. Paid consultant
2. Peer
3. Colleague
4. Trade show
5. Trade publication

### What you need to do

Back up your website with trade show exhibits, trade magazine adverts and anything that associates your business and product with reliable peers.

Make it very easy for the customer to engage with you or your team directly, show a human face on the website and telephone numbers that are manned by real, knowledgeable and motivated people.

Be available and willing to listen and to negotiate

Provide detailed specification sheets, financial breakdowns, positioning statements and competitive analysis sheets and everything you can to make the decision process easier for your customer. Make sure that he/she can access this information any time from anywhere.

## Purchase

### What influences them

6. Paid consultant
7. Peer
8. Colleague

### What you need to do

Make it easy to order or purchase online and make all the appropriate contact details readily available. Once again make sure that phones are answered by real switched-on people.

## What next?

Here's a simple plan to define your web strategy

Write a few lines under the heading, "**Where we are now**". Be as honest as you can and do a bit of research to get the best picture you can. Try to get a handle on the amount of enquiries and resulting business you currently get form the web.

If possible try to find out how others in your industry are doing on the web and see if you can find a role model or two. Look with extra attention at your key rivals.

Now write a paragraph to describe as vividly as you can, "**Where we believe we can get to in two years**". I have given you

some basic ideas of what is achievable and a bit of research amongst your competitors will fill the gaps.

Now that you know where you are and where you want to get to, write a few lines to describe "**A strategy for getting there**". Tip: This might be a good point to invite some external help into the process.

With a strategy in place , the next step is to, "**Design the user experience**". Make sure that as many as possible of Your customers and potential customers engage with your website and make it all the way to placing an order.

Get the website designed and created, test it thoroughly, pilot it with a few trusted people and get ready for launch.

#### **Launch the new website**

If at any point you would like to avail of our free advice by telephone or discuss what we might be able to offer you, please feel free to make contact by telephone 08448844713 or by email [enquiries@technology-fusion.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@technology-fusion.co.uk).

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