

# Formulating An Internet Strategy

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It's almost a cliché nowadays - Well, let's be honest, it *is* a cliché, but as with the most annoying clichés, it's also true - that if you're in a technology-related business you're at a disadvantage if you don't have a presence on the Internet. But for those who like to live on the edge, there's an Internet strategy out there that's even riskier than ignoring the net completely: establishing an online presence for your company without first deciding what you want to do, how you want to do it, and how you'll know when you've met your goals.



How often have you visited a corporate web site that had no real focus, or which didn't offer much more than a toll-free number for you to call for further information? First impressions are just as important online as they are in person, and if you make a bad first impression online, it's going to be difficult if not downright impossible, to get that person to visit your site again in the future. That's why it's critical to approach your Internet presence with the same care and diligence you would use in approaching any other development project.

## *Designing Your Strategy*

The first step in any strategy is to draw up a formal list of things you hope to accomplish with your online presence. Don't be afraid of being too detailed with this list! The more information you have up front the better, as ideas tend to inspire other ideas. Take some time to visit other sites that deal with subjects or products similar to yours - you'll often spot good ideas you can adapt for yourself and weaknesses you can counter when developing your own web presence.

When thinking about what you want the site to do for your existing and prospective customers, step back and consider how you interact with them now. Once you're online, your customers will have largely the same needs they had before, so those needs are a good starting point for your Internet strategy. Do you focus more on trying to convince people to buy your product, or on helping them use it once they've completed the purchase? The things that you're already providing people on a regular basis should be the first things you consider putting online. You know there's an audience waiting for them.

It's also important to examine what you want the site to do for your company-preferably in more detail than "providing services to existing and prospective customers" and "making money." Both are worthy goals but going online can do far more for you than that. An Internet presence can help you streamline communications with customers, simplify product distribution, and reduce your reliance on printed materials.

For example, you'll be helping both your customers and your support staff by getting as much technical support information online as possible. Every question that your customers can easily find the answer to online translates to one less telephone call that your support staff has to deal with-and it's far easier to make your online support information available twenty-four hours a day than it is to keep your support center staffed around the clock.

If you expect to get onto the Internet and immediately start making money hand over fist, you'll probably be disappointed. It's possible to run a web site that directly generates revenue, but you'll find that most of the sites that have done it quickly are doing it by selling consumer products that require very little customer interaction outside of the actual purchase process. That's a luxury that most folks doing business-oriented software development don't have. But just as the marketing and support staff of your company play a very important role in its success, the marketing and support roles a web site can play can be just as important in the overall success of your online presence.

### *Connecting With Your Online Audience*

Online, as in print, the way you present your message to your audience can have just as big an impact on how it's received as the content itself-and the online world has a few additional presentation twists that print media has never had to deal with.

For example, once a product brochure hits paper it's going to look exactly the same to everyone who picks it up. That's not necessarily true of web pages, or even of email. It's important to think about how any electronic message will be presented to the recipient. For web pages, this can be affected by things like the browser the reader is using and how high the pixel resolution or color depth of his or her screen is; for email it can depend on the format you use to send out the message.

Many people will immediately dismiss a message that's delivered to them in a way that requires extra effort on their part to receive or understand. That's why it's very important, unless you have a well-thought-out reason to do otherwise, to consider the following:

Email and other simple online information should be delivered and stored as plain text, not as HTML or some kind of word processing format.

- Web pages should be readable on as broad a variety of systems as possible. Don't assume that people are browsing your site at high screen resolutions and don't make them navigate a 3-D Virtual Reality world to get to your product list.

Many people are connected to the Internet with relatively simple hardware and software. It seems ridiculous to deny someone simple access to your company's message simply because her or she is browsing the web from his or her television set or a relatively out-of-date web browser, but thousands of sites make this mistake every day.

### *Determining A Process*

It's impossible to overemphasize the importance of formally specifying your online presence before you get started trying to implement it. The act of planning everything out in painful detail beforehand brings issues to the surface that you wouldn't have run across otherwise. Software developers can probably relate to the fact that "gotchas" are far easier to deal with on paper in the planning stages than they are after you have half of your product developed.

Once you have a list of things you want to accomplish online, your next step is to walk the list and evaluate what resources you'll need to implement each item. Again, being detailed early on is important. If you want to allow online sales, for example, you'll need to have the information services set up behind the scenes to make it work. What kind of software and hardware support does that imply? Who's going to do the work, and who's going to be responsible for managing the process? Drill down through each aspect of your proposal and look at what its implications are. There will be a few surprises, but this is the best time for them, when you can still easily accommodate them and change direction if necessary.

Eventually as part of this process, your specifications will begin to take shape. Good formal specifications will answer all the questions that might come up in the course of developing your online presence: what all the pieces are, what they need to accomplish, how they'll accomplish them, and how everything fits together. For large projects, you might want to break things down into separate steps or phases that can be treated as milestones in the development; perhaps you want to get all your marketing plans and product downloads up first, and add online commerce as a separate step after that. If you've done your job writing the specifications, you'll be able to see how the sales portion of your site will integrate with the product downloads before you start doing any actual coding on either.

In many ways, planning your online presence is surprisingly similar to any other project. As with software development, every hour spent in evaluation and planning before you begin has the potential to save you many more hours in costly guesswork and backtracking later on. And every one of those hours is money in the bank. 🏦