

It's Already 2010

Do You Know Where Your Website Is?

Time races on, and nowhere so quickly as online. We all knew the mantra of keeping your Website up to date, but today, it's more than that. The digital world has entered a new era – what some call Web 2.0 – and if you aren't careful, your Website may be woefully out of touch. Ours was. This is what we learned as we re-thought and re-designed to create a new Kleidon.com.

Problems

These Website issues were problems for us, and they concern many companies today:

- How does your Website rank on searches? Can search engines see it or is it “invisible”? If so, it needs to be optimized for search engines.
- Does your site have an old look or feel?
- Does it lack features like blogs, e-newsletters or feeds? These are not only popular, but they also connect you to customers or clients.
- Does your brand socialize? Think of your Website as a place to have a grand opening every day, a place to interact with clients, consumers, dealers and colleagues.
- Does your marketing plan balance the need to be seen online and off? Does it balance the budget between traditional and new media?

Solutions

We had to work through the following solutions, starting with research and strategy and ending with...well, there is no end to it. We have employed much the same thinking to help clients manage today's massive shift in expectations for Websites. This process applies, with variations, to almost any company. The description below is a good beginning, but only a beginning.

Research and Strategize

- Review your existing site carefully to decide whether to rebuild or remodel. Consider content, connection to other sites and the technology powering your site.
- Review competitors' sites. With a good site, anyone can be the online leader, so why aim for anything but the top?
- Explore new ways to integrate your site with your sales and marketing processes. How are people connecting with one another and with your company today? How could your site enhance that?
- Do a reality check. Research the ways people search for your site. Don't rely on what seems rational, but find out what really happens.

Simplify

When your last site was done, it probably incorporated some special features or effects that turned out to be losers in the online world. For example, flash intros, developed to add interest and act as an animated "cover" to sites, have lost out to immediacy on the home page. It's not just that people are impatient (they are!), but that flash is invisible to search engines. If your site is to be seen by search engines, the home page has to have searchable, HTML text. Your old site may also have areas that can be cut. Identify any parts of your site that people don't use and simplify.

Fold and Tighten

Website visitors have become so sophisticated that we can embed many more links. One might think of Websites as moving from a book model to a movie model, operating on more levels at once. Except that it's more like being in a movie than watching one.

For example, most sites once had navigation on the left of 5-7 main items and a sub-menu. Now we design home pages with a top nav, main nav, drop-downs, baseline nav, text links and sometime highlight links and a linked slideshow. A site we designed recently had 35 home page links. Our own [home page](#) has 20, but the winner is our [portfolio page](#) with 90 links. On one page.

This change to navigation is the result of folding sites into more complex structures. It requires some genuine intellectual power to organize at this level of complexity, because at the same time, sites must appear simpler, cleaner and more intuitive.

These new ways of thinking about sites also hint at another big change: much more connection to the larger virtual world.

Think Outside the Site

Today, Websites serve as the hub for your connection to clients and customers, interested prospects and influential others, like the media.

Perhaps the single most useful new way to connect with your target markets is through an e-newsletter. A recent study found e-newsletters to have the highest trust level among consumers of any online communications besides Websites themselves. E-newsletters are only one of the possibilities of social media, where staying in touch may already have begun to replace selling.

Toss Out a Favor

If Websites are becoming more like social events than company brochures, that may explain why visitors look for a free take-away, like a party favor. If you are a B2C company, you may want to give consumers a favor in the form of a coupon that helps introduce a new product.

If you are a B2B company, a favor might be free information. Luckily, becoming the provider of information establishes you as an authority in your field. The very word “authority” has “author” as its base. This is just one of many ways that favors, or “freemiums” as [Chris Anderson’s new book](#) calls them, can turn out to be good for a company’s bottom line.

Whatever you do, it’s not mere generosity. Visitors increasingly expect favors. And return the favor.

Open Many Doors

It’s clear that consumers want more control of how and when they access information. You can accommodate by letting them choose how to connect with you. Do they want to buy directly from your site (no salesmen, please)? Comment or ask questions through a blog? Receive e-notices of discounts, sales or specials? Follow you on Twitter? Meet you on Facebook? Send for estimates or RFPs? If you open many doors, more will enter.

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