

DOING BUSINESS ON THE WEB

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

A micro guideline to doing web business.

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Use the technology

How many times have you been to a web site filling out a simple registration form or something, and you discover that instead of submitting the form, they are asking you to print the form, fill it out, then mail it back in? Doesn't that make you want to scream?

If you can't submit the form to a proper CGI script, at least send it to an email address, and check that mailbox a few times an hour or whatever is appropriate.

What? Your web developer / guru / expert doesn't know how to do that?

And you are paying them how much? Get another developer.

You don't have an email address? Get another host.

Why would you ask a visitor to take a step backwards in technology to respond to something on your web site?

This is similar to selling products through a web site, but only offering people an 800 number to place their order. There are at least 150 companies that have sprung up to allow web transactions to take place. Third party transaction processors include such things as PayPal, Western Union, CertaPay. And if you live in Canada, there is a market test on right now for using your debit card online as well.

Watch your competition

Keeping an eye on your competition is always a good thing, but even more important in a web environment.

New trends and technologies appear on the web with zero warnings. You, or the person responsible for keeping your web site working, has to be aware of things as soon as they appear.

Not everything will be applicable to your situation, but how will you know that unless you know what's out there?

Never say 'Under Construction'

This makes me scream as well. Any time I see that on a web site, it's a good bet I won't be going back. I'm sure most people feel the same. For one thing, there's usually no clue how long it's been 'Under Construction'. Hours? Weeks? A few months? Since the last ice age? And no clue when construction will be completed.

If a part of your web site is not ready to go live, hold off on the site launch until it is. Let's see, how else can I say that?

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It is better to be a little late on a launch date, than have one of these pages tucked away on your site, believe me.

Never stand still

This is not the same as 'Become a moving target'. What I mean here is, your web site is a dynamic presence. The web is a dynamic environment, demanding more and more interaction between the visitor and the site. New technology comes out and who knows which one is going to catch on and be the next killer app.

This is tied to the first rule. You don't have to be the first kid on the block with the new technology, but you do have to make an effort to discover things that will either bring people to your site, or encourage them to come back.

Changing the content periodically or adding something interesting to your web site is easy to do and usually has positive results. What you add may not even be related to what you do.

Huh!? You want me to add stuff to my site that has nothing to do with it? Absolutely!

Think of web sites or stores that you have visited, and enjoyed your experience there. Was everything on the web site or store related directly to what they do? Your favourite coffee bar sells coffee, but I bet they also have a bulletin board where locals can put up posters of upcoming events. Or they provide meeting space for local groups. Or they support a local organization by donating a percentage of their sales. Or ...

Anyway, you get the idea. But a better reason to keep your site alive and changing is for search engines. They look for content change and give that a certain 'weight' when deciding where to place you in a results list. So if that isn't a reason to keep this rule in mind, you may as well fold up your web tent and go home.

Take your web site seriously

My experience has been that most people put up a web site after already establishing a working bricks and mortar site. They figure, well if it works here, it will work on the web. WRONG ANSWER!

Developing a presence on the web and marketing that presence is entirely different than for a traditional presence. Even people who specialize in marketing may not be knowledgeable enough to do your web site justice. If all they have ever done is traditional marketing (bricks and mortar) and design work (hard copy), you would be wise to look further for someone who actually has provable experience working in the web environment.

Business owners seem to have the idea that once they've got their web site up, business will just start rolling in. Again WRONG ANSWER!

Your web site has to be taken as seriously as your traditional store. Would you open your business if you couldn't take payments? Of course not. Would you not want to offer your customers as much choice as possible in the ways they can pay for your goods or services? Of course you would.

So why wouldn't you do the same things on your web site? With all the ways to pay for something on the web, so many sites still only offer the traditional choice of credit cards. Well, in case you hadn't heard, lots of people are still cautious about using their credit card on the Internet. Do you use your credit card on web sites? If you don't, why would you only offer that choice on your web site?

It comes down to whether you can afford to lose customers or not. There are too many other web sites where someone can go to get the same (or pretty close) service, that will make it easier for them to complete their shopping trip.

Consider how long it takes to move from one web site to another. Maybe a few seconds? Half a minute at the most? You have that long to get your visitor engaged in your site and interested in staying. They might even buy something.

Wouldn't that be a treat!