

Keeping Your Website from Becoming the World's Loneliest Airport

By Karen Breen Vogel

Anyone who has traveled extensively for business knows that airports come in all shapes and sizes, and with a wide array of amenities. Generally the size, configuration, number of shops and restaurants, availability of transportation within the airport, and other features are dictated both by the size of the city or town in which it resides, and the number of flights/passengers it serves daily.

Imagine if that weren't the case, though. Suppose you flew into a town in Montana where the population is one-to-one people to cattle, and the airport was as big as, and had all the amenities and parking of, O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. You'd have to wonder what somebody could possibly have been thinking. And what that person is now doing for a living, since designing airports was obviously not his or her strong suit.

Yet that is often the approach marketers take when creating their websites. Organizations often spend months building elaborate sites, with page after page and link after link going ever-deeper into the most arcane and minute details about their products or services. The site becomes a nightmare to maintain, and hogs more than its fair share of space on the server. And in the end, if you look at the traffic statistics, most of the site remains as unvisited as a sushi restaurant in a meat-and-potatoes kind of town.

Taking this approach sure seems like a lot of wasted effort. Especially when there's a far more sensible alternative: Start with a simple website and a set of measurable business goals, and let your visitors tell you where you need more detail, where you can collapse pages and get by with less, and where the level of detail is just right. That's what the new generation of Web analytics tools can do for you - if you know how to read the data.

Unlike every other sales model throughout history, the Internet is a buyer-initiated and controlled environment. Buyers don't have to wait for a salesperson to spoon-feed them information; it's all sitting out there for them to see, and they can view it in any order they choose. When they engage with a site, they're looking to have the type of meaningful "conversation" they used to have with a salesperson, only on their own terms. The problem is it's almost impossible to predetermine the direction of all those conversations with any accuracy. But by studying visitor behavior on the site, what's important and what's not quickly becomes apparent, and you can then structure the site accordingly.

Take our airport example again. Suppose you have three fast food restaurants, three sit-down restaurants, two snack shops, and a gift shop in an airport that serves as a hub for connecting flights. As you look at traffic patterns and profitability reports, you see that there is almost always a line at the three fast food restaurants, the two of the three sit-down restaurants are usually empty and losing money, the snack shops are profit machines, and the gift shop is doing about what you expected.

You wouldn't have to be a marketing genius to figure out that you ought to close at least one of the sit-down restaurants and use the space to expand the capacity of the current fast food units or add more. You might want to add another snack shop, perhaps closer to the farthest gate, and leave the gift shop alone.

That's what Web analytics can do for your website - again if you know how to read them. They can show you where most visitors go after they hit the home page - do the visitors head straight for product information, do they check out data sheets, or do they look at the "About" section? Analytics also can show you where they go after that,

and after that, etc., helping you gain an understanding of how visitors behave on your site, and whether that behavior is providing the business results to achieve your goals.

But it goes much deeper than that. By viewing how much time they spent in a particular section, you can learn where you need to make adjustments. If they click around several pages of product data, and return to certain pages from time to time, it could be an indicator that they're in search of more information than you're offering. You may want to try expanding those pages a little deeper and see if the pattern still holds. If it does, you can keep going until visitors are no longer going to that next page. At that point, you know exactly the amount of information they need, and you can remove that final page.

The same holds true on the other end. If you have a few pages behind the "About Us" section and very few visitors ever click past the company description, you know that what your prospects want to know about you is already visible at that first level, and you can reassign the server space for those other pages to some purpose that will be more productive.

Another strategy along these lines is building individual landing pages as incubators to take advantage of the burgeoning use of search engines for pre-purchase research. Users land on these pages, gather some basic information, and can then be moved to the full website if the organization is successful in capturing interest. This method not only helps drive visitors to the site - it also provides valuable feedback on which messages are most effective in converting various user types.

You can use this same strategy within your site as well, building dynamic offer windows that are the equivalent of an airport or shopping mall kiosk. These windows are usually created to take advantage of sudden interest in a particular aspect that's hot at the time, .e.g. a free add-on, a discount, or an extended warranty if the visitor purchases within a specified time frame. This type of on-site promotional effort is almost limitless, and will help you gather information to remove barriers and speed the sales cycle in the future - something that is almost always at the top of any list of business goals.

This "build as you go" strategy is different, and requires a little more work on the analytical side. But in the long term, it will save you money on both the front and back ends, and given the buyer-initiated nature of the Internet, it will make your website a much more effective selling tool.

There's no point in building an elaborate airport if no one is going to go there. The same applies to a website. Start small, learn about customer behavior, and expand it as needed, and your site will quickly become a high flyer.

Karen Breen Vogel is a highly regarded industry thought leader on the Internet's impact on the future of marketing, and President/CEO of ClearGauge (www.cleargauge.com), an organization that helps companies with complex buying cycles leverage the Internet. Clients include Dow Chemical, DuPont, Emdeon, GE Corporate Financial Services, MOD-PAC, and Siemens. She can be reached at karenbv@cleargauge.com.