**"No Thanks, I only want 70% of the market"**

The other night, with my laptop in hand, I curled up on the couch, flipped on the television, and began reading through my afternoon e-mail. A few minutes into my first response, my e-mail client chimes that I have a new message. Curious, I flip over to my Inbox. It's an article about successful marketing on the Web. It covered all the usual steps, such as proper use of Meta tags, doorway pages, and positioning software.

As I reached the end of the article, I drifted my attention to the television for a moment. It was a history lesson on the California gold rush and how the elements created such a challenge for people arriving from the east. There were brave people who actually worked as guides to help people cross the treacherous mountain passes and down into the lush California valleys.

Suddenly my split attention to the history lesson and that marketing article came crashing together. I realized that no matter how much marketing one does to drive traffic to their site, it is all in vain if the visitor can't reach your site in the first place.

Like pioneers from the gold rush days, we all seek to stake our claim in the Internet marketplace--to reach as many customers as possible, to sell the best products, and to give the best customer service. But lets face it, the Web is a tricky place, just as I am sure crossing the Rocky Mountains on foot, in the dead of winter, was no easy task.

From your very first HTML tag, your marketing campaign has begun. The way your site is designed is critical to your marketing success. Did you know that television stations broadcast their picture 15% larger to accommodate every brand and model of television? They do this so that 100% of the viewing audience sees the picture as it was intended.

The same rule should apply to the development of any public site on the Web. But too often, it doesn't. What so many Web sites lack is 100% compatibility and graceful degradation techniques which are necessary to ensure every visitor has an equal opportunity to purchase your products and services.

**GRACEFUL DEGRADATION**

Creating a 100% compatible Web site is no easy task, and is a leading topic of discussion between Webmasters. The possible combination of features that can go into a Web site are staggering.

Because of this, it becomes very easy to exclude a large percentage of your potential market, without even knowing it!

HTML is a difficult language to master. Not because it is complicated, actually HTML is the easiest programming language I have ever learned. It is tricky because it is very forgiving, and some HTML tags, even though presented in the same manner, will not behave the same in different browsers. Building a 100% compatible Web site between multiple Web browsers is certainly possible, and is mandatory if your goal is to be successful.

Web sites fail everyday, and their owners may think that their marketing strategy didn't work, or there was too much competition. In reality, chances are that wasn't the case. They probably suffered from the repercussions of a WYSIWYG (Publisher) and not testing their pages properly. Remember, there are several operating systems out there such as Windows, Macintosh and Linux, to name a few. Each has a version of Internet Explorer and Netscape available to them, and believe it or not, Internet Explorer and Netscape perform differently between those platforms.

And to make it even more difficult, there are different versions of each of those browsers, on each of those platforms.

If you design a site using Microsoft Front Page, then you have just designed a site that will work wonderfully in Internet Explorer, but most likely not for Netscape. This is because Microsoft, if you didn't know, is also the author of Internet Explorer. If you use Page Mill then you will probably suffer the same problems, just in reverse, where everything works great in Netscape, but not so well in Internet Explorer. I am not an expert on Web Publishers because we refuse to use them in our production process we are all too familiar with the problems that they create.

We often see new clients with existing sites that were written with a publisher, and a majority of our time is spent cleaning up their code to enhance their site for compatibility. Don't get me wrong, Publishers have their place, but when it comes down to building a serious product, do it right. If you have a brick and mortar store, wouldn't you use a door that you know opened and closed properly every time? You wouldn't use a door that only opened 7 out of 10 times. Those three people that couldn't get in would go across the street and buy from your competition!

## BELLS AND WHISTLES

Using the brick and mortar analogy again, let's talk about bells and whistles. So many Web sites use technology that is not 100% compatible, and this can be as bad as not letting in every 3 out of 10 people to your store. It is important to use technology that is widely supported and stable. Even technology that is widely supported can have its drawbacks. I can't recall how many times I've visited a Web page that has a Flash-based splash page and I get that annoying puzzle in the center of my screen. There is no hyperlink anywhere on the page and no alternate way into the site. (Yes, I have the Flash plug-in, but I choose to leave it out of my Netscape browser for testing purposes.) So, the only way I could ever get into that site is if I returned with the Flash plug-in installed. How annoying! If I went to your brick and mortar store and you wouldn't let me in because I had a blue shirt on, and you told me that if I came back with a red shirt I could then enter you'd never see me again!

## TEST, TEST, TEST

The most important thing you can do is test your site before you ever launch it to the public. Test to see how well it views at different monitor resolutions (640x480, 800x600, 1024x768). Test it in different browsers, different browser versions and on different platforms. If you only have one computer, ask a friend who has a different system to take a look for you.

Now remember, what you see on your screen is not necessarily what everyone else will see. You may have a 1.5 GHz computer on a DSL line with a 21-inch monitor viewing at millionths of colors. Your Web site might be written with Front Page, using FLASH and APPLETS for effects and has so much content that you set your page width to only be viewable at 1024x768 resolution. You may have multiple graphical images on each page, and music playing in the background. So, if this is your page, just how compatible is it?

Let's take your average user: They have a 600 MHz machine, on a 56k modem and a 15-to 17-inch monitor viewing at 256 colors. They are using Netscape 4.7, or Internet 5.0 if you're lucky. They have not installed the Flash plug-in and are viewing at 800x600 for their monitor resolution. It is likely that your Web site, to this user, is not what you would want them to see. In fact, it is likely that they can't even get into your site because they don't have the Flash plug-in and there is no alternative for them. This user is one of those 3 out of 10 that can not get in, and will not return. Nor will they tell their friends to visit. Not only have you just lost one customer, if you apply the rules of word-of-mouth, you've just lost several potential customers as well.

## CONCLUSION

If you market to 100% of the people on the Web, but only allow 70% of them into your site, then you are not maximizing your marketing potential. If visitors come to your Web site with blue shirts, don't force them to come back wearing red shirts. Be sure the door to your virtual storefront is open to anyone who chooses to visit. ■

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