

“Driving Site Traffic”
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Field of Dreams - Not.

"Build it and they will come," does not hold true on the Internet. One must take an active approach to driving site traffic to your website. Creating a website without considering how to drive traffic is like creating a print ad and never inserting it into a magazine. Or like creating a TV commercial that never airs. Though these may win awards, neither will drive sales or consumer activity.

The key to driving traffic to your website is to use a broad range of techniques, from the simple to not so simple, free to costly, in an effort to maximize your traffic. Most critically though is to drive traffic from among your target audience.

First a few definitions of the key traffic components:

“Traffic”- broadly refers to the number of clicks, visitors, or unique users into your website. However not all traffic is created equal. And each of these measures is something different.

“Target Audience” - the primary user profile that you want to reach for your particular business activity. This target may be based on demographic, psychographic or attitudinal factors. When you drive traffic outside of your target audience you are wasting dollars and effort. If you are running a website for women's pantyhose, a banner ad that drives male sports enthusiasts probably would not be an effective traffic builder, because we need to worry about the quality of the traffic.

This may seem like an obvious observation, but so many traffic-generating activities are driven against the wrong target, that untold millions of dollars are wasted. It was John Wannamaker who first said “I know half of my advertising dollars are wasted I just don't know which half.” Don't waste yours on the wrong target.

“Return On Investment” (ROI) - traffic in and of itself is not the objective of driving traffic. The real objective is getting a measurable return from your investment to drive that traffic. If you are a commerce site, just having people walking in the front door doesn't cut it unless your conversion ratio (that is actual buyers/ total traffic) is high enough to make the traffic building activity pay back. Keep in mind this is a tough task especially given industry estimates that 2/3 of all shopping carts are abandoned.

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In summary to effectively drive traffic you must know:

- ❖ who is your target audience
- ❖ what you want them to do in your website
- ❖ how you'll get a return on that investment
- ❖ what your available budget is

Plus you must be willing to both implement and adjust your traffic driving plan. Adjustment is essential because with the Web one must always be willing to DLA - Do, Learn, and Adjust. You adjust both because the Web allows easy adjustment and it optimizes your program.

How to invest in traffic building.

Assuming that your target audience is well defined, and your site is constructed with a primary purpose so that the target that reaches your site will provide you a return, let's talk about how to invest in driving traffic.

First, determine the budget you have to spend. This budget may be thousands of dollars or hundreds of thousands, but either way you must have a starting place for your activity. A good way to determine your budget is to consider what you would spend on other activities (e.g. advertising, trade shows, sales meetings) to achieve a similar affect. Also consider the average value of a transaction.

Second, select from among the traffic generation techniques which you feel would be most appropriate. Choose from a broad mix of techniques, which we'll explore below.

Third, plan to implement the traffic techniques in a way such that you can measure their success. If you are going to run multiple banner campaigns on several properties, make sure you can track how many visitors came from each banner execution and property. Without accurate measurements and tracking, you won't be able really know what's working and optimize.

Finally, implement the program with an understanding that it's really a test of your activities with planned-for expansion. Again this comes back to an attitude of DLA.

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Traffic generation techniques

Some of the techniques we will explore are:

- Search engine & directory registration
- Banner advertising placement
- Keyword search engine banner placement
- E-mail marketing
- Permission marketing
- E-mail list rental
- Viral marketing plans
- Friend referral programs
- Affiliate marketing
- Contesting & Giveaways
- Loyalty & Continuity programs
- Reciprocal links
- Branded environment creation
- Cross pollination from other media
- Often overlooked simple techniques

Search Engine & Directory Registrations

Everyone talks about search engine placement and performance. In part the discussion happens because the CEO types your Web address into his favorite search engine and you don't come up on top.

The truth is, there is a battle for search engine performance with well over 1 billion Web pages worldwide and more than 3 million pages being added every day. Yet even the best search engine tracks less than one-fifth of the Internet's Web pages, and collectively the top 11 Web search tools only index 42% of the Web. So what does one do?

First, keep in mind that a search engine listing is like a telephone directory listing - a good way for someone to find your business, but not the sole vehicle you can count on to bring traffic through the door.

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Second, search engines continuously re-rank their listings as new sites are submitted, and current sites are re-submitted. In essence, a battle rages among all sites to be "king of the hill" or "leader of the pack."

This is not to say search engine registration should be ignored. It can't be. You must not squander the opportunity to get listed. Make sure your site keywords and metatags are kept current. And specifically charge someone with monitoring and updating your keyword referrals, and search engine referrals and placement. Not only must your site be registered initially but also a site's search engine performance must be monitored continuously and re-registered periodically.

Banner Advertising Placement

Many sites accept banner advertising. In fact it is the major revenue source for most portals and content publishers. These banners can be bought in a wide variety of configurations. However as banner advertising has become more prevalent, consumers have become more cynical, and consumer loyalty to sites has grown, the click-through of banners has declined precipitously to an average of less than one-half percent.

In order to be effective with banners, you must consider the host website's audience, mindset during surfing, your target, and how these align. If the site's audience is primarily women, but your target is men, your effectiveness will be minimal. On the other hand, several mass oriented websites will now let you specify the demographic you desire. This comes back to re-emphasize the need to know your target audience.

Banner advertising is bought on a per "activity" basis with a cost per thousand (CPM). The most common activity is the number of times a banner is displayed. However other cost bases are number of click-throughs, or even activities later conducted within a website such as purchases or registrations. The rate and activity that triggers payment can and should be negotiated with each banner campaign.

One effective way to buy banner advertising is with media group networks that use optimization software. These groups employ software that initially runs your banner ads across the entire network and then based on achieved click-through rates, adjust on-the-fly the sites and locations your ads appear in to maximize your click-through.

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Keyword Search Engine Banner Placement

Keyword search engine banner placement allows you to buy banners that are triggered by specific word(s) typed into search engines. For example, if you bought the keyword phrase “rental cars”, whenever a user did a search for “rental cars” your banner ad would appear at the top of the returned page and above the list of sites. The more specific or unique the keyword to your website the more likely this technique will be effective. This type of placement is more expensive on a CPM basis, yet with superior efficiency can provide a greater ROI.

E-mail marketing

We all know e-mail is an effective business communication tool. In fact, e-mail exceeded voice as the primary business communication medium in 1998. E-mail is the “killer application” for the Internet.

Moreover e-mail can be an incredibly powerful tool for driving site traffic. In fact, tools exist to deliver customized e-mail at minimal expense. The best example of that is all the spam we each receive, because if it weren't inexpensive and effective there wouldn't be so much of it. Yet think for a minute about spam. We don't consider it spam when we get e-mail that is relevant or requested, only when it's unsolicited or irrelevant. So the key here is what we refer to as permission marketing.

Permission marketing

Permission marketing is when the user has signed up to receive future Communications from you. The best programs even allow consumers to specify the types of information and frequency with which they'd like to receive same. In a sense you create a free subscription newsletter which, if done well, your recipient will look forward to getting time and again. Yet always give the user a mechanism to opt out of future Communications, which adds credibility to your website as being respectful of the user.

For perspective, permission oriented e-mail offers can often achieve response rates of 6 to 12% with a well targeted Communication and relevancy. Now that's loyalty and performance!

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E-mail list rental

I don't want to imply renting an e-mail list is a bad idea, because if used properly this can be very effective. One must ensure that the list is comprised of a target that would be receptive to your offer, and that the list itself is maintained and cleansed of non-deliverable e-mail addresses. It has been estimated that up to 25% of any e-mail list will be non-deliverable addresses if not cleansed or maintained within the past 12 months.

Viral Marketing Programs

Viral marketing programs get their name from the way they spread so quickly, like a virus. The key to a viral marketing program is to make it so compelling that people who receive the communication want to pass it along to their friends. Think about when you got a funny e-mail and forwarded it to 10 friends. Viral marketing achieves just that affect. Its word-of-mouth taken to the next level.

A common execution of viral marketing is a friend's referral program. Oftentimes websites will ask for a friend's name and then send them a letter endorsed by you. These emails are more likely to be opened and responded to based on the original referrer's "endorsement", and often the promotion will even allow the referrer and/or the friend to accrue points or prizes for every friend or purchase made.

Contesting & Giveaways

Running contests or giveaways is a proven way to generate registrations and traffic into your website. These most frequently occur within banner advertising or via e-mail. As with contests & giveaways in other media the higher the perceived value and likelihood of winning, the greater the response rates and more you can ask of the visitor.

Many times contests are announced via pop-up windows, called "interstitials", which appear over an active Web page. The use of interstitials should be carefully considered, as their intrusiveness can be both a benefit with greater responsiveness and a detriment due to user annoyance. In fact, not all websites will allow the placement of interstitials on their properties.

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Loyalty & Continuity Programs

“There’s no customer as valuable as a satisfied customer” and “it’s easier to do More business with a current customer than create More business from New customers”. These two statements are at the heart of loyalty and continuity programs.

It is critical to drive current customers as traffic back to your site. Otherwise you may never know when a current customer became a former customer. With the ever increasing number of sites, do not take it as a given that your customer will return.

Most commonly loyalty programs look something like the airline frequent flier programs (where you accrue points) or next one free with so many purchases. Both are effective, the major trade off is in the complexity of implementation.

Reciprocal Links

You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours, is at the heart of reciprocal links. This works best when both players have allied target audiences and services that are non-conflicting, for example hotel chains and car rental agencies. Each site places a link to the other within their site. In fact it need not be just a link, it could even include graphics, copy or a testimonial.

The beauty of reciprocal links is that they are free and highly effective. They may also enhance your site’s being viewed as a valued resource.

Affiliate Marketing

In its simplest form, affiliate marketing is like banner advertising that’s paid for by the sponsor site receiving the traffic and user activity. The affiliate, in this example your site, places a logo, banner ad or other link within its site which will take a visitor to the recipient sponsor’s website. A code is included as part of that link, so the recipient can track the visitor through the agreed upon activity occurring, and then accrue for the affiliate credits based on the activity. Most frequently the payment is a % of sales dollars, but it can also be a set fee per registration or other measure.

An affiliate marketing program can bring traffic to the sponsor’s site at a very effective cost and return on investment; however, these are often only traffic generators if the

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sponsor's site is already well known. On the other hand, as an affiliate you must balance the potential revenue against sending a visitor out of your site.

Branded Environment Creation

Creating a Branded Environment is similar to an advertorial in print advertising. The concept is that you provide added-value information to the user in a low-sales pressure/ less commercial fashion.

An advantage of the branded environment is that other sites, which might not otherwise link to your website, may be willing to link to a branded environment with you as a sponsor because the information is more impartial. This is a really a less intrusive way to generate site traffic, but one which can be very effective especially if there are potential conflicts from other site's linking to your main site.

Cross Pollination from Other Media

Integrating your traditional media plan with your website is essential to driving traffic. You should absolutely cross pollinate your user base, from the Web to your brick and mortar operation and back again. Your website is really an extension of your brand and everything you do must support that brand image.

It is still too common to see print ads without the website URL. And worse, oftentimes the website will not reflect either the current brand positioning or imagery. If you are running a promotion at retail, your website should support the promotion. What better way to process retail contest registrations than to have users register at your website, thereby both driving them as traffic and insuring you have complete user information that you haven't paid to get entered into your database.

Often Overlooked Simple Traffic Building Techniques

There is a laundry list of simple traffic building techniques that are often overlooked. Whether you have a well-developed clientele, or not, these ideas can effectively drive tremendous traffic at minimal cost. Do these all now!

1. Put your URL on all business stationary and collateral printed materials.

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2. Record your URL on your voicemail hold message, and spell it out, very s-l-o-w-l-y so there is no mistaking what it is.
3. Add your URL as well as a promotional offer to the signature line of all outbound e-mail
4. Put the URL on your fleet of trucks
5. Put the URL on all shipping labels, packing materials, and all corrugated boxes.
6. Be sure to own the misspelling of your URL. For example if your company is Pierce.com you'll want to also own Pearce.com. Pears.com and any other obvious misspellings if you can get them.
7. Be sure your advertising agency and PR firm always include the URL in everything they create and distribute.
8. Put the URL in all advertising, and catalogs, and don't hide it in tiny type. Your URL is your business location and shouldn't be hidden like a copyright.
9. Have your hosting provider set-up your website to function both with and without the www in front of the name. Some people just forget to type it in.
10. Ask your vendors to give out your URL along with any other company information they release about you.
11. Eliminate all AOL, Hotmail or other free e-mail accounts for business use by your employees. If your company uses “companyname.com” as its web address, insist every employee have an email that ends with “companyname.com” not somebody else's domain.
12. Ask satisfied customers and web visitors to refer your site to a friend. Nothing drives traffic as well as satisfied users.

Some Final Thoughts about Traffic Building

The Web is a very efficient medium. By that, I mean it will efficiently communicate your message, whether good or bad. If that message is well thought out, great! However if the message is poorly conceived, the web will just as efficiently communicate what you would rather it didn't! So please by all means, work diligently to ensure your message is the message you want to portray.

You should be proud of your website, and list the URL wherever you can. If you are not proud of your website, don't spend money on traffic building; spend it on fixing your website so you are proud of it.

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Remember to keep your website current and fresh in appearance. While you must consider the user’s need for familiarity in navigation, the appearance must not go stale. Please be sure to do site updates.

The best traffic building program cannot rescue a poorly conceived website and business plan. Although it could help speed up your failure and shorten your agony. Then only if you are really paying attention, and DLA, will you get another chance for a tremendous success.

You must test, measure, and optimize in order to keep up.

Be sure to drive current customers back to your site as traffic. Traffic building cannot be just among potential new users, because your user base is like a leaky bucket. There are always users streaming out the bottom. Your traffic building programs must help plug the leaks as well as pour new users into the top of the bucket. Successful traffic building is an ongoing process, and by staying on top of it you can achieve success.

Author’s Biography

Stephen Phillips is an Internet Marketing Strategy & Solutions achiever with 19 years experience in building businesses via superior marketing and execution. He has created award-winning website projects, advertising, public relations and marketing campaigns for numerous clients, large and small, including Kraft[®], the NFL, Sara Lee[®], Wonderbra[®], and Kayser-Roth[®]. He has worked with several high growth entrepreneurial corporations, shepherding them to success, through multi-generation assignments.

Stephen fundamentally believes that to succeed in the Internet space, one must take a strategic and marketing approach. The Internet and Web are tools with which to achieve your business objectives. Stephen founded Zoom Interactive to create exceptional Interactive Solutions through superior business understanding, well-formulated strategic planning, outstanding service and timely execution.

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