

# The Web

When *Agency Sales* magazine last wrote about the importance of manufacturers' representatives integrating web pages into their marketing and communication strategies, the concept was one that was just picking up speed with MANA members. Now, just three years later, the pace with which reps are jumping on the web has increased dramatically. As of now, there's a "good news/bad news" scenario for reps when it comes to this important Internet presence. The good news is that half the members of MANA have web pages. It's not hard to figure out the bad news — half the members of MANA do not have web pages.

In an effort to determine why the latter half appears to be dragging their collective feet, we sought the counsel of two consultants who are not only familiar with the importance of web pages, but also know what reps need to do to be successful in that venture.

While both consultants recognize the fact that there's been a noticeable increase in the number of reps that have web pages for their agencies, they acknowl-

edge that they're well aware many others are lagging in that area. That lack of interest or participation begs the question, "Is it more important today than ever before for them to get on board?"

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## Perception is Reality

According to Bill Perry, PerTel Communications, Mission Viejo, California, "That really has to do with perceptions and how individuals view the companies they conduct business with. Conversely, reps have to wonder how others will view them if they have or don't have a web page. The old-school belief by some reps is that 'I don't need a web page. I've always done business my way and it's worked fine, so why change?'"

Perry continues that there's a big difference today. "Principals and customers have an expectation that the reps they conduct business with have a certain level of technological ability. As a result, they expect their reps to have a web page. If the rep informs them they don't have one, it all goes back to perceptions, and as we all know 'perception is

reality.' The reality of it is that the principal or the customer is going to be reluctant to lean on the rep that doesn't have an awareness and ability with the latest technological tools."

Presence and perception are two words that rear their heads when Keith Peck, president of *ElectricalSmarts.com*, Glastonbury, Connecticut, weighs in on this subject.

Peck notes that the ever-present web page has grown in stature to the status of a business card. He makes the point that no rep would go into business without a card communicating their various contact points. The same holds true with the web page. "The fact is, the rep isn't necessarily calling on the business around the corner," he explains. "People not only have to be able to find the rep, but they also have to know what the rep does — that is, what lines does he represent and what value-added services differentiate him from the competition? Hence, the critical importance of a web page.

"If a potential principal or customer has need of the rep's ser-

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vices, today the simplest thing is for them to go online to locate you and your business. All they have to do is 'Google' you and they'll learn immediately if you're a good fit or not."

Peck continues that reps are relatively lucky in comparison to distributors and principals in that they don't have to construct and maintain somewhat sophisticated web sites full of all kinds of information. "Rather, the rep should include his various contact points (address, phone, fax, e-mail, etc.) and the attributes that make him different from others."

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### Work with Pros

Previously, *Agency Sales* has cautioned those who wanted to get started on the web to stay away from their brothers-in-law or a friend of a friend who volunteers to help them get started. While that advice still holds true, the consultants were asked if it is easier today for a rep to find a source to help them than it was just a couple of years ago. If so, where should the manufacturers' rep look for help?





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**Bill Perry**

Perry recognizes that reps and other businesspeople are only too quick to rely on the acquaintance, the nephew or brother-in-law to get the web page up and running. “After all, those individuals very often possess an enthusiasm and an eagerness to do that kind of work. But what happens is that the initial eagerness quickly vanishes as the demands increase and the task becomes an actual job. It’s not fun anymore. Compound-

## Some Web Site “Best Practices”

In speaking with consultants and reps, a number of steps — or “best practices” — rise to the surface concerning reps and their web pages. Among those best practices are:

- **Get one** — The tools of technology, or more specifically the business web page, are hardly passing fancies — they’re here to stay.

Among MANA members, there are those who can truly be cited as pioneers when it comes to being among the first to realize the importance of having an online presence. Then there are others who have arrived fairly late to the game. The fact remains that a full 50% of MANA members can be found somewhere on the World Wide Web. For MANA members, the reasons for taking that first step on the Internet are all over the place. Over the years, we’ve heard about the need to:

- Position the agency for international business.
- React to prodding by principals.
- React to pressure from customers.
- Follow the example of others who are already there.
- Come to grips with the fact that a web page is simply an integral part of a marketing and business communication program.

The important fact, however, is that web pages are

here and they’re part of the exploding information age — so get used to it.

- **Work with a professional** — How many horror stories have been told about the rep who paid a couple of hundred dollars to his brother-in-law or the kid from the local community college to create the agency site? There are some “diamonds-in-the-rough” when it comes to web designers who know what they’re doing but haven’t yet developed a reputation, but by and large the best path to follow is to work with a trained pro.

- **How do you find a pro?**

- Ask fellow MANA members who already have successful web sites.
- Seek recommendations from your principals.
- Check with local businesses that you know have a successful web presence.

- **Keep it fresh, simple and navigable** — The correct equation for successful communication on the web is the same as it would be for any venue. In order to have your message successfully sent and received three ingredients are needed: a sender (in this case, the rep); a receiver (customers, prospects, principals and others); and finally, a means (for the purposes of this discussion, a web page).

Since the first two — the sender and receiver —

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ing the problem is that the rep is supposed to be running his business and his business depends upon a certain level of ability to communicate. Now, you've got this young kid with a propeller hat on his head and his tendency is to create some sort of a web page filled with all kinds of flashy gadgets. The web site he'll put together for you is not only flashy, it's awful."

Peck agrees when he says, "It's

the same as if you're putting out a printed brochure. You want to work with a professional, someone who truly knows how to communicate and to effectively deliver your message to a specific audience. When it comes to web pages, there are plenty of people out there who can do the job, and there are more of them around today than ever before."

He urges reps to look both locally and regionally for assistance.

"Find someone who already has a portfolio, someone who has shown that they have a feel for what is truly appropriate. They need to have some inkling of what you do for a living."

Peck continued by citing MANA's long-standing advice to members when it comes to seeking legal counsel. "It doesn't do any good to work with a general practice attorney to take care of your legal needs. You need some-

are firmly in place, the goal then should be to make the means the most effective it can be. The words of two reps are useful in understanding how they approach this task.

The first rep, based in Ohio, who focuses on the industrial market, admits that jumping on the Internet was hardly his idea. "I wasn't even thinking about it," he says, "but when a prospective principal asked for the address of my web page, it dawned on me that I was residing pretty much in the information 'Dark Ages.'

"When I told him I didn't have a web page, he asked, 'How does anyone know you're there? What about prospects in your territory that don't even know you exist? How do they find you?'"

"I hadn't felt any pressure previously to have a web page, but this manufacturer's reaction made an impression, and it was an impression that I felt I had to act on.

"As a direct result, I contacted a web page design firm that had been recommended to me. I selected the most appropriate content, he created the page — and I was off to the races."

Looking back at his experience, a Southern California rep couldn't really remember the driving force behind his initial foray into the world of web pages. "I think it was a matter of following the leader," he

explains. "I saw others, including my principals and competitors, and felt I had better get moving."

Instead of contracting with a consultant for a one-shot design project, however, this rep outsourced the work to a web page designer and paid him a retainer to continue work whenever needed. "That way he's always available to me. Whenever I need to add or delete material or provide links to principals' web sites, he takes care of it for me."

More important, however, according to the rep, "is that this outsourced resource regularly redesigns, updates and freshens our site. He maintains that sites should be redesigned every 18 months to two years. He simply does it automatically, and we don't have to worry about it.

"All the proof we need that this approach works for us comes in the compliments we receive from visitors. We're told our site is simple, navigable and easy to use. That's all we need to hear."

Following up on that last point, reps and consultants agree on the importance of keeping a web site fresh. According to one consultant, "Just as magazines and newspapers go through a redesign, so too with web sites. The last thing you want is to have the same old material up there year after year. It won't take long for your visitors to ask, 'Is anyone home?'"

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one who knows rep law. It’s just the same when it comes to web pages. Find someone who knows what you do for a living.”

### **The Importance of Seeking Assistance**

Perry contrasts that effort of working with an amateur with what the rep can get from a “pro” who is experienced in creating and maintaining web sites. “For less than \$500 a professional can deliver a web page that lets the rep communicate with his customers and principals in a simple and effective manner. As a matter of fact, many people have found that you don’t even have to go to a designer. Many web service hosts can provide templates for reps that come complete with all kinds of presentations and art.”

In any event, he urges that reps new to web pages seek assistance. “You may have to have a consultant provide you with a first pass on the effort and you take it from there.”

He added that in choosing such outside assistance, “There are many options to choose from. Most of the larger hosts will provide good monthly rates to maintain the rep’s web page. They also might require payment for a year in advance. I’d urge reps to ask other reps who are already up

and running with a web page and to work off their experience.” In addition to checking with rep peers, Perry urged reps to contact the owners of any web sites that they find particularly useful and attractive. “They could very well provide you with the recommendation you need to get your needs met.”

Naturally everyone wants an attractive, well-constructed, usable web page, but Perry raised a couple of red flags when he began discussing what might constitute a poorly constructed site. “Consider whether your site is up-to-date and kept that way. Is it regularly maintained? Are all the links usable or are some of them broken? Is there too much animation? Are there too many useless gadgets? Also, you don’t want to have too much text. Remember that the attention span of web page visitors is very short. If anything turns off users, it’s having to read too much. What you want are brief paragraphs that are quickly and easily read, and those paragraphs should be filled with information and data that is pertinent to the visitor’s needs.”

Once up and running, Perry urges that the site be updated no less than annually, “but as lines come and go and new information about the agency is made avail-

able, we’ve actually done it more frequently for many of our clients.”

### **Updating the Site**

Timeliness, simplicity and usefulness are at the top of Peck’s list when it comes to what the rep wants for his web page. “Realistically, I recommend that the rep update his web site as often as he can. That doesn’t mean, however, that it has to be updated as often as a manufacturer’s site. The rep’s needs are quite different when it comes to communicating over the Internet, but I would say if they could do it once a year that would be great.”

Peck, who has worked with MANA members, cites his experience with one rep when he explains the expense involved. “It’s not all that great — especially when you consider what you get for your investment. With one MANA member, we spend about four hours a year on their site. The cost for updating minor information is within the range of \$50-\$75 hourly. Naturally, it’s going to cost you more when you start from scratch to have the site designed, but once you’re up and running, it’s not really that expensive.”

When all is said and done, however, one rep put the entire discussion of web sites in perspective when he offered, “I was fortunate in that I got moving in this area about seven years ago. Now when I look around, I see many of my peers are really scrambling to catch up. It’s a little bit like that train that’s leaving the station; I’m glad I got on when I did. Since I’m well established and have already done most of my ‘web’ work, I can now concentrate on what I do best — selling!” □