Web Sites In The "RoHS" Age

by **LARRY KAUFMAN**

In the spirit of the 'RoHS' (recycling of hazardous substances) age, let me ask reps the question: "Will your current web site meet the expectations of 2008? Before offering an answer, let's note that reps are creating their own hazards and avoiding end-of-life considerations for their web sites by perpetuating rather than replacing sites that are essentially obsolete. It still seems true that many sites seem to be the same ones that were posted at the dawn of the Internet age (although the graphics look more dated than that). Here's my answer to the question posed at the beginning of this paragraph: probably not.

That most professional field sales organizations have failed to do any meaningful online selling is surprising because they were quicker than manufacturers or distributors to embrace the web. Apparently the early adopters were stimulated by the attractively low cost of entry.

Some sites substitute a list of product categories, without brands, for a line card. If I were a principal, I'd want reps who were proud to carry my line and eager to connect their customers with it. If I were a customer, I'd expect those reps I had come to depend upon to make it easy for me to find out about their products instead of putting obstacles in my way. If I were a manufacturer looking for representation, a web search would be part of my due diligence, and if I wasn't finding useful information, I'd just keep surfing. If you don't list lines on your web site, I'll truly appreci-ate an e-mail telling me why. I've never yet heard a reason that made sense.

Principle vs. Principal

Another thing I see all too often, and not only on the web, is a rep talking about "principles." Actually, I approve, if the meaning relates to mission, credo or approach to doing business. But unfortunately, it usually refers to the manufacturers represented. If you're in the rep business, you ought to know the difference between a principle and a principal.

The root problems behind the

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failure of field sales organizations to think seriously about their web sites or to invest meaningfully in them seems to start with not remembering that you never get a second chance to make a good first impression. The second failure is lack of focus on what you can or want to accomplish online, or on whom you hope will visit. If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there.

Here's a comment I've heard, and not from reps: Why worry what's on a rep web site, since no one goes to them anyway? Is that a self-fulfilling prophecy? Does no one come because there's nothing there for them?

Do you not invest because you don't see a direct return? Of all the communication tools you've ever had, web results are the easiest to measure — not just by counting hits or click-throughs, but by tracking results. But of course you won't have measurable results if you haven't designed your web site to deliver them — or if you haven't defined what results you're looking for.

What Makes a Good Site?

True, I did find a few good rep web sites, and I've talked to their owners about them.

One rep told me, "I've optimized my web site to serve prospective principals. I don't really care about visitors I haven't specifically sent, but I like being able not only to get my credentials to manufacturers who are looking for representation, but also to be the first to deliver them."

Another rep justified the investment in a good web site by saying that if it broke just one tie and got one new line that might otherwise have gone elsewhere it would have more than paid for itself.

A third respectable site was built on a totally opposite game plan: serving customers not already being called on through search engine optimization tied both to product category and territory.

These examples suggest two of the important communities you can reach online, but there are also current principals, customers, distributors, employees and prospective employees. You can also use your site (although I saw only a few doing so) to provide "backroom efficiency" for exchange of specific, transactional information with principals and customers. The best way your site can help you market yourself to current and new principals is by demonstrating how effectively you serve customers.

Stay Clear of These Mistakes

Now for the Seven Deadly Sins — over and above those already mentioned:
• *Amateurish or dated graphics*

> *I've always had enough confidence in technology to believe that the only limitation on what the web can do lies in what our imaginations demand of it.*

— You never get a second chance to make a good first impression.
• *Non-functional opening page, telling visitors to "enter here."* They have already entered in their own minds; why are you making them do so again?
• *Pages marked "Under construction" or "Coming soon."*
• *Failure to provide convenient or intuitive navigation.*
• *"Last update" information that is far in the past* — Your visitor will trust the currency of information on an undated page a lot more than on a page last updated in 2001.
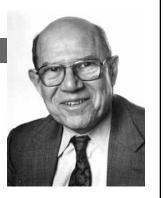• *Flash or other motion or sound effects that don't add, only distract.*
• *Visitor counts* — That's nobody's business but yours.

I no longer consider it among the deadliest of web site sins not to "sell the system," since your rep association and MRERF are doing it for you. However, like chicken soup for a cold, a link

and/or some reinforcement couldn't hurt. Presumably your manufacturer visitor understands the economic advantages of outsourcing sales to manufacturers' representatives, and your customer or potential customer knows the synergistic benefits of the multiple-line sales call for customers.

I've always had enough confidence in technology to believe that the only limitation on what the web can do lies in what our imaginations demand of it. In the rep world, you're demanding very little — and that's what you're getting back.

If I decide to recycle this article again — will anything have changed? ❒