

Use Today's Web Technologies To Connect With Your Customers

by PETER KOEPPEL

For many small businesses, including manufacturers' representatives agencies, the traditional ways of attracting customers are no longer enough. Today, technology abounds, and the smart business owners are using it as a vital part of their business-growth strategy. In fact, since many people now spend more time online than they do listening to radio or watching television, web-based advertising is a must for any small business to survive. Following are some of the latest technologies you can use to reach existing customers and attract new ones.

- **Blogs** — Blogs are short for "web logs." These are informational postings you can create to inform potential and existing customers about your products or services. Your posting can include text, images, video and audio. In addition, because of the interactive nature of blogs, your prospects and customers can post feedback on the blog, thus keeping you on the pulse of your customers' needs. And unlike a web page, which is relatively static and

updated periodically, your blog is an ever-changing venue that gets updated as often as every day.

Most blogs are linked to the company's main web page, making them a great source for attracting people to your site. Even better, the more you update your blog, the higher your blog will appear in search rankings, since sites such as Google like blogs that are regularly updated and have links.

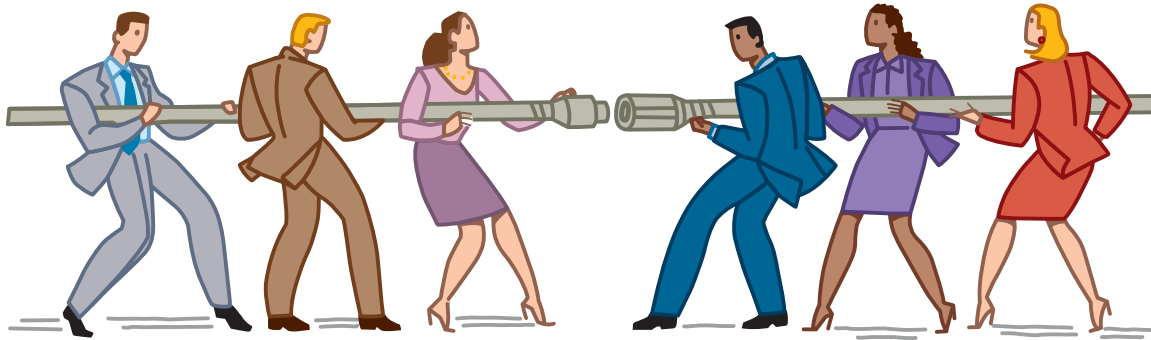
- **RSS Feeds** — RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication. With an RSS feed, you can send news and information directly to your customers and prospects. Additionally, you can stay updated on industry trends by subscribing to RSS feeds that supply customized, relevant content about current events. Creating RSS feeds can also help position your company as a leading source of information, which could mean more customers for your organization. RSS feeds are a perfect resource for small businesses, because there's no cost involved in establishing and maintaining them.

- **Tagging** — Tagging enables web users to organize online in-

formation from many sources, such as web sites, links, images, etc. When the information is tagged, you can easily find it later, no matter where it came from. Because of this, tags help bring people to your blogs or web site. You can utilize tools like del.icio.us to help tag URLs with keywords related to your business. Tags can benefit small businesses by enabling them to access and utilize information more efficiently.

- **Podcasting** — A podcast is essentially your own radio show on the web. Customers and prospects can download podcasts automatically, so it's easy for people to listen to your company's broadcast. With a podcast, your message gets delivered to people unfiltered, which enables you to have a conversation with the listener and personalize your company. Some great podcast topics include interviewing the CEO or a leader of your company, or having an expert in your field as a guest. Podcasts greatly enhance your company's image and build credibility.

- **Wikis** — Wikis are web sites that site visitors can edit and up-



date. Why would you want people to edit your web site? Because it provides a forum for customers, prospects and company employees to collaborate. Realize, though, that your competitors and others can abuse or alter information on wikis; therefore, consider limiting access to your wiki or only allowing employees or managers access to editing the posted information. While a wiki is good for documenting and sharing information, a blog may be a better choice for developing ongoing dialogue between your company and customers.

- **Online and Interactive Video** — If you can't afford to run a large television campaign for your company, you can certainly post your television commercial or a video clip of a key person at your company being interviewed on your web site. Even better, take it a step further by creating something clever or intriguing and posting it for free on YouTube or Google Video, which are sites that millions of people visit every day.

Another great way to reach customers is to have an interac-

tive video host on your web site. So when someone lands on your site, a video clip of the CEO or spokesperson for your company greets the visitor. To gain the maximum impact from this technology, consider shooting video of your host so he or she appears to be walking onto your computer screen when a visitor lands on the site, and have the host appear to be talking directly to the web site visitor. The interactive host might talk briefly about the benefits of doing business with your company and point out some of the highlights of your site. They might also talk about the benefits of a particular product your company sells.

Finally, create and post short video clips (30 to 60 seconds in length) on your site that a visitor can interact with. This helps to involve the prospect with the contents of your site.

Grow Your Business With the Right Technology Mix

The more technology you integrate into your marketing and advertising mix, the more cus-

tomers you'll attract. Remember, the Internet is a great way to build your company's credibility by highlighting your innovation and providing first-class information. So put some of these web-based tools to work for you today. When you do, you'll grow your business and your customer base. □



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