THE DEVIL & THE DETAILS

making dollars and sense out of your website

Before engaging in any discussion of websites, an independent manufacturers' rep would benefit from asking themselves (and answering) one very important question: **"What are you trying to accomplish?"**

In the view of author **Lance Loveday**, the co-author (with **Sandra Niehaus**) of *Web Design for ROI*, asking yourself that question is a great beginning. But he suggests that the answer should also guide reps who are already a fair way down the path with their website experience.

"Too often," maintains Loveday, "a rep or any other business for that matter, will treat the creation and use of their website as simply a checklist item. In other words, they write it down as something they have to do. Once it's done, they can check it off as having been accomplished. But there's much more to website design and use," he maintains.

Loveday explains that "for reps, a website can serve a number of important functions. It can:

- Serve as a lead generation site.
- Generate revenue as an e-commerce site.
- Be a recruitment tool for new principals.
- Allow you to put your best foot forward with prospective and existing customers."

JACK FOSTER

Jack Foster, president of Foster Communications, is the editor of **Agency Sales Magazine**. In addition to his duties in working with MANA, Jack writes for several other major marketing publications. His experience in publishing includes writing, editing, photography, production and printing. This, combined with Jack's understanding of the independent sales rep function, can provide the winning formula for your communication needs. Email: **jfoster@manaonline.org**.

Lest anyone doubt the importance of those and other functions that a website can provide, the following facts are very compelling. According to Loveday and Niehaus,

- Eighty-three percent of businesses use the Internet to research and find potential vendors.
- Seventy-five percent of web users admit making judgments about the credibility of an organization based on the design of its website.
- By 2012, 43% of all retail sales are expected to be influenced by or made on the Internet.

No wonder reps, principals and customers are in a hurry to create a web presence if they haven't already done so.

Keeping those important points in mind, Loveday continues with some starting advice to help simplify the process. "Here's what I'd recommend in terms of getting started. First, you might want to do a little research on your own with the goal of finding sites that you find attractive, professional and useful. Often, simply by looking at the bottom of the home page, you can determine who put the site together. Failing that, don't be afraid to ask the site owner where they got help with their venture."

He continues that certainly one of the many benefits of membership in MANA and other associations is the fact you get to meet others like yourself. "If you find another rep site that is especially attractive, ask the rep about it. When you go about the process this way, learning from others, then everyone — manufacturers' rep and customers — benefits."

One misstep that he cautions about when it comes to websites is "something we run across all the time. You'll come across someone's sister who dabbles in websites. The problem there is you can run into someone who doesn't really get what you're trying to accomplish. They don't understand all the nuances of the rep business or the relationships you need, and the venture will fail. What can result then is that the client (e.g., the rep) winds up driving the ship. That is as opposed to a professional providing the rep with the guidance that they need."

Following a Business Strategy

Another potential website pitfall that the author warns about is ensuring that your website effort fits well with your overall company business strategy. "It's very important that the rep understands exactly what he hopes to accomplish with

his business, and by extension, through his website. Be sure that you make all of your important decisions ahead of time, document what you hope to achieve, and don't leave anything open or ambiguous. If you don't define what it is you're trying to do, you leave a great margin for error and the final result will probably be much different than anything you anticipated."

An important ingredient for a website is the inclusion of customer feedback, according to Loveday. "Make sure that what winds up on your web page is reflective of what your customers want and need. You can learn what they want and need by asking them. One way to gain that feedback is by using the analytic tools that accompany any website. For instance, consider how many people visit your site. Once there, how many people take action?"

That's not the only way to gather customers' opinions, however. "While actual surveys can be useful," he maintains, "perhaps the most usable method to find out what customers want is to actually have them visit and use your site and let you know what they think. The approach should be something like, 'You haven't seen this site before. Sit down, visit it, and tell me what you think.' When the rep is able to view the site through the eyes of their customers, you can very quickly determine what's good, what might confuse them, or what might cause them to lose faith in the site and in you.

This type of feedback can provide valuable insight. Remember, though, customers are notoriously inaccurate at predicting and remembering their real actions. Also, don't forget about the feedback you're not getting. For instance, you won't be hearing from any visitors who left your site too irritated to swing by the customer service page or fill out a survey form."

Once your site is up and running, Loveday isn't necessarily a big believer in updating a site within any given period of time. "I think it's much more important to ensure that your site accurately reflects you, your business and the goals of your business. If the design is industry appropriate and up to current standards and appears to meet your needs and the needs of your customers, then leave it alone.

I've seen several sites that have been up as long as seven years without changing and they're still effective today. Conversely, I've seen others that have been up six months and don't do anything effective. They're in serious need of some updating."

As far as any website trends that he sees evolving any time soon, Loveday notes that one growing area is "Reader Generated Content." Such content, according to the author, "enables more user dialogue between the site owner and the site user. I expect that this trend will continue in one form or another. In terms of how it might impact reps and their sites, I'd say it could result in online discussion areas where reps can share best practices or trade experiences with various manufacturers and customers."

Finally, Loveday weighs in with his thoughts on the subject of a website being an expense vs. an investment. "If a rep views his website as a necessary evil and something he has to do, whether he wants to or not, then it's obviously going to be seen as an expense. If, on the other hand, it's seen as a valuable tool to maximize your business' effectiveness, then it's going to be seen as an investment."

[Editor's Note: For a more in-depth view of Loveday's and Niehaus' comments on *Web Design for ROI,* readers are directed to their book's website — **WD4ROI.com**.]

Views from the Field

If the foregoing are the views of authors and consultants who offer a level of expertise in the area of websites — including their design and maintenance — what then do folks in the real world think?

Manufacturer's View

Tim Douglass explains that when he took over as part-owner of **Smico Manufacturing** about the middle of last year, the company's website (**smico.com**) was already in place. The previous owner had already set it up. "Given that fact," he explains, "once we took over, our goal was to simply maintain customer focus on our company and our products."

Smico, located in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, has been manufacturing screens to meet the demands of various industries around the world. The company provides screeners for fine separation in the food and drug industries, heavy raw materials refining, hazardous waste separation and many other special purpose industrial applications.

Douglass continues, "Above all, we strive to be user friendly. To that point, it's not all that difficult to determine how useful your site is. If a user visits the site and only

stays for five seconds and then is off to another address, you know you're not getting the job done. It's incumbent upon you, the site owner, to do whatever is needed to maintain their interest. That's something we're constantly working on with our web designer. We're always weighing customer feedback, and analyzing everything we do to make the site more effective.

"Naturally, our ultimate goal is to sell products. To achieve that goal we've been successful in using the site as a marketing tool and maximizing the site's search engine capabilities."

When it comes to addressing the challenge of maintaining an effective website, Douglass notes that content remains a concern. "We're always considering how much content to put up there, without providing too much. You don't want to give away any company secrets, but at the same time, you want to ensure that you're communicating with your audience."

Rep's View (1)

MANA member **Jon Crowley, Charles P. Crowley Co**., Irwindale, California, recalls that about ten years ago when his agency began having a presence on the web, it was mostly because of the urging of his principals. According to Crowley, "It was along the lines of them telling us 'Thou shalt have a website.' As a result, we had one."

He adds that, as he looks back, it's hard for him to realize how a rep today could effectively operate without a web presence, "especially when it comes to dealing with prospective principals. If you have a website, you can refer them to it, and they can find much of the important information that they need to know about you."

As to what his first steps were more than a decade ago, Crowley recounts, "We contacted another rep firm, got a referral to a designer and we were off to the races. I think one of the benefits that we enjoyed was that we already had some preprinted literature concerning our company and all the lines that we represented. As a result, we were way ahead of some other firms in that we had some ready-made content to immediately put up there."

Crowley doesn't recall any real challenges or problems on the way to getting up on the web, or more to the point, "I don't recall any problems that I knew anything about." By that he means whatever technical concerns had to be addressed were beyond his technological reach.

While Crowley still maintains outsourcing the rep website function is a good idea for a rep firm, "It could be very beneficial to have someone internal to the organization who can make modifications for you. That way you don't have to constantly go to the outside person to get something done." He adds "you'd be lucky if you found someone who possessed that computer/Internet knowledge and brought them into your organization and from there had their role evolve into some other areas (e.g., sales) for the agency."

Overall, Crowley sees nothing but benefits for the rep to have a website. "As I already mentioned, it will help immeasurably with prospective reps, and it also achieves one of the major goals that any business — especially a rep firm — would like to achieve, and that is to look bigger than you actually are."

Rep's View (2)
One rep firm that seemingly took Crowley's advice concerning bringing someone on board and having their role in the agency evolve is **Electrical Marketing Services (EMS),** Altamonte Springs, Florida.

Scott Davis oversees the EMS website (**emsorl.com**) and he explains that the original evolution of the site began with outsourcing the job to a company located right next door to the rep firm. Coincidentally, that's where Davis was working before joining EMS about two years prior. "When I was with the outsourced company, we simply put a template together for EMS. Then when they needed anything updated, all they had to do was place the information in the template."

Davis maintains that he sees the benefit of having someone on the rep firm's internal staff who can do the

updating. "I don't know how much time and money we've saved by having me on staff, but I'm sure it's substantial. It just makes sense to have someone within the organization who can do your updating for you."

Rep's View (3) / Web Guy
Jeff Karnes, CPMR, can look back over close to a quarter-century career as a manufacturers' rep and recall the beginning of his efforts to create a website for the rep firm he was with. "I was with an electrical rep firm when we realized about 10 years ago that the Internet and certainly having a website were the wave of the future. Our goal at that time was to create a website that would serve as a real resource tool for our customers and distributor-partners. We wanted the people we worked with in the channel to be able to do everything from learning about our agency, to checking inventory, to finding the manufacturers that we conducted business with."

He recalls that since he was involved in the effort from the very beginning, "We had a very steep learning curve to negotiate. There weren't nearly as many resources then as a company can avail themselves of today."

Today, Karnes is with **LightSOURCE of Indiana** (**lightsourceindiana.com**), Indianapolis, Indiana, and he's still working on websites. Armed with more than a decade of experience climbing that Internet/website learning curve, he offers this advice to other reps when it comes to websites: "If anything, a rep firm should make sure they communicate with their customers in order to learn what their hot buttons are when it comes to websites. Learn what's of interest and what's beneficial to them and make sure you incorporate that into your website. Once you've done that, never let your site get old or stagnant." **as** **m**

Working the Web

An **Agency Sales** reader made a suggestion that we were quick to follow up on — he thought it would be a good idea to periodically direct readers to websites that would be of interest to them and their businesses.

Our initial request for some input on this subject came up with the following results. If you have any additional sites you think might be of interest to MANA members, please forward your suggestions to Editor, **Agency Sales Magazine**: jfoster@ manaonline.org.

If you don't know the difference between an employee stock ownership plan and a stock-option plan, give **nceo.org** a try. In the stock-option section, you'll find all you need to know. The NCEO is a private, nonprofit membership and research organization that serves as the leading source for accurate, unbiased information on employee stock option ownership plans (ESOPs), broadly granted employee stock options, and employee participation programs.

If you need help managing your money, check out **money. com**. **Money Magazine's** extensive site for information and advice on how to invest your savings is helpful to businesses of any size.

Assistance in shopping for a loan is offered at **loanlocator.com**. This site was originally developed as an aid to lending institutions, helping them attract customers via the Internet. The site saves time for customers by letting them obtain average interest rates for mortgages, automobile and home equity loans, state-by-state. The site also provides state-based property tax rates and assessment ratios.

Price Watch Corporation (**pricewatch.com**) is one way to find a great street price on a computer product. This site allows retailers to advertise their prices in real time using their proprietary system. Visitors can use a search engine or click through category or product lists to find dealer-pricing information.