



It begins innocently enough. A short e-mail from the top: "*Oh, and get the website updated would you?*"

Easy enough. How hard could it be to build a website for a direct marketing agency? It's what we do everyday, albeit in print. Of course, it's not quite like making pancakes. You can't just add milk to a credentials deck and have a tasty website up and running in a few days. Looks like those interactive folks had a point after all with their teams of architects, technologists and human interface specialists.

OK, so why don't we approach this like any creative challenge. Let's take our creative brief and apply the same structure: Why, Who, What, How, How Much and When. Sounds like a good way to approach building an agency website too. And so it begins...

Why?

Because everyone else has one? Because URL is a groovy thing to say? Frankly, it almost seems a moot question. But think twice. When well-executed, a web presence eloquently answers the questions most agencies find difficult to answer: who are we? What's our voice? What's our personality? What's our culture? Good agency websites ooze a defined persona that is evident in their words, design and functionality. Bad agency websites just ooze pablum.

Who?

Unlike a direct marketing package, it's not easy to customize your message to your audience on the web. Therefore, the ideal agency website should serve up a motherlode of information to potential employees, potential clients, potential investors, jealous competitors, hungry suppliers, worried parents, happy landlords and suspicious spouses.

What?

OK, so we've reserved our own private Idaho of one virtual gigabyte somewhere at the end of an Ethernet cable. Now what? Most agency websites have the mandatory brochureware... creative samples, awards, press releases, principal bios, contact information, "Reasons to Pick Us" and a reasonable dollop of corporate culture. This is all good, but let's not stop there. Does your website have to be just a passive server of information? Nope. Let's also reverse the flow. Add some pull to the push. Connect an FTP server. Add a blog. Perhaps an online survey or three. Communal whiteboard. Subscribable listserv. And soon, if you care enough about your web presence, you may just grow yourself a little DM portal. A small hub of useful, relevant information that people may just want to check up on every so often. Hey, you never know.

How?

Design

There are a million web design books out there. But spend an hour surfing around and you'll quickly understand what your website should avoid. The web is not a PowerPoint presentation. Your audience has not been placated with cranberry muffins, bad coffee and slippery leather chairs. They're just a click away from another agency website. So buddy, this better be a fun ride. When it comes to design, think low-fat. Pages should load quickly, navigation should be instantly understood, type should be legible to 50-year old eyes and animation shouldn't be distracting from important content. Aside from that, common sense and a firm grasp of print design rules make good bedfellows.

Words.

Oh dear, were all the copywriters at lunch when some agency sites were created? Or perhaps, they get so giggly about writing for a new medium that they left their pants at home. Take a close read of some agency sites and a few disturbing trends arise. All features, no benefits. All claims, no support. Lots of jargon, little editing. When words are at a premium, make sure you use premium words. And for God's sake, ask for the sale. Have a clear call to action, even if it is just for more information. Prospects visit your site to learn more about your company, therefore give them every opportunity to request a direct response. Don't hide it away on a 'Contacts' page. Build an e-mail link into every case study page, add a personal e-mail link to every bio, consider a pop-up window when they leave your site. Start thinking of your site as a direct response vehicle and it may actually start acting as one.

Implementation

At this point, let's just raise a glass of amber liquid and mumble a silent thanks for the first mathematician who married an artist. Out of that unholy union came a new breed of artist...the web developer. Half database guru, half designer, all geek. Basically, just leave it up to these strange but friendly folk to translate your website from a Quark file to HTML, XML, SGML, OPML, or whateverML. Just remember to ask them to make your site easily refreshable, ideally by implementing a secure database that lets you update content as often as you wish. A site should be simple enough for a cursory glance to catch all the basic information, and yet deep enough so that a longer exploration will reward with more details.

Publicity

If a tree falls in the forest... every new website requires a little analogue help to attract some visitors. And you'll need more than an 8pt Helvetica URL on a business card to do so. Hence, you'll probably require a committed web driver campaign to draw clicks and eyeballs. Maybe even a non-virtual DM package to potential clients. You could also consider a print campaign, search engine ranking program or press release.

How Much?

What does a website cost? As most agencies employ internal resources to create their site, this becomes an utterly nebulous figure – exactly the type of number that gives CFO's migraines. What is it worth? The best thing to consider is ROI. Simply stated, an effective web presence serves as a global all-day, all-night snapshot of your company. It will never win business for you, but it will support (or undermine) your efforts just as effectively as any credentials document, dog and pony show or newspaper article.

When?

How long will it take? It will take exactly as long as it takes to redesign your corporate logo, or develop a new company mission statement. Which might just explain why most agency websites go stagnant for years at a time. Like most self-promotion activities, a web presence is at the mercy of temporal gravity, drifting haplessly to the bottom of everyone's To-Do list.

But don't let that stop you. A web presence can be a powerful business ally, when it's not taken for granted. The best place to start is on the web itself. Surf around and look at the virtual face your competitors are presenting to the world, and then branch out into unrelated industries. Because, sooner or later, you'll get that short e-mail from the top too. Best be prepared.

Paul Joyce is Group Creative Director of MC Direct. Three months ago he was spectacularly unqualified to write an article like this, but then he got the aforementioned e-mail from his boss. He's also smart enough to surround himself with good people that do incredible things daily. He can be reached at paul.joyce@mc-direct.com.

A list of admirable sites:

www.taxi.ca

www.lowermp.com

www.zig.ca

www.wk.com

www.ogilvyone.com

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