

Internet Marketing Tips

The following pages include some internet marketing tips. Hopefully you'll find some tips that you can make use of to make your business grow. Remember that these are just some ideas, and not all of them may apply to your situation.

Linking Strategies

Links to your site from other sites bring additional traffic. But since Google and other major search engines consider the number of incoming links to your website ("link popularity") as an important factor in ranking, more links will help you rank higher in the search engines, too. Google has introduced a 10-point scale called PageRank (10 is the highest rank) to indicate the quantity and quality of incoming links. All links, however, are not created equal. Links from popular information hubs will help your site rank higher than those from low traffic sites.

1. Submit Your Site to Key Directories, since a link from a directory will help your ranking -- and get you traffic. Be sure to list your site in the free Open Directory Project (www.dmoz.com), overseen by overworked volunteer human editors. This hierarchical directory provides content feeds to all the major search engines. Plus it provides a link to your site from an information hub that Google deems important. But don't be impatient and resubmit or you'll go to the end of the queue.

Yahoo! Directory is another important directory to be listed in, though their search results recently haven't been featuring their own directory as prominently. Real humans will read (and too often, pare down) your 200-character sentence, so be very careful and follow their instructions (<http://docs.yahoo.com/info/suggest/>). Hint: Use somewhat less than the maximum number of characters allowable, so you don't have wordy text that will tempt the Yahoo! editor to begin chopping. Business sites require a \$299 annual recurring fee for Yahoo! Express to have your site considered for inclusion within seven business days (<http://docs.yahoo.com/info/suggest/busexpress.html>). Other directories to consider might be About.com and Business.com.

2. Submit Your Site to Industry Sites and Specialized Directories. You may find some directories focused on particular industries, such as education or finance. You probably belong to various trade associations that feature member sites. Ask for a link. Even if you have to pay something for a link, it may help boost your PageRank. Beware of directories that solicit you for "upgraded listings." Unless a directory is widely used in your field, your premium ad won't help -- but the link itself will help boost your PageRank and hence your search engine ranking. Marginal directories come and go very quickly, making it hard to keep up. Don't try to be exhaustive here.

3. Request Reciprocal Links. Find complementary websites and request a reciprocal link to your site (especially to your free service, if you offer one). Your best results will be from sites that get a similar amount of traffic to your site. High-traffic site webmasters are too busy to answer your requests for a link and don't have anything to gain. Look for smaller sites that may have linking pages. One warning: Be sure to only link to complementary sites, no matter how often you are bombarded with requests to exchange links with a mortgage site that has nothing to do with yours. One way Google determines what your site is about is who you link to and who links to you. It's not just links, but quality links you seek.

4. Write Articles and Tutorials for Others to Use in their Newsletters. You can dramatically increase your visibility when you write articles in your area of expertise and distribute them to editors as free content for their e-mail newsletters or their websites. Just ask that a link to your website and a one-line description of what you offer be included with the article. This is an effective "viral" approach that can produce hundreds of links to your site over time.

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5. Begin a Business Blog. Want links to your site? Begin a business blog on your website, hosted on your own domain. If you offer excellent content and regular industry comment, people are likely to link to it, increasing your site's PageRank. If you have a blog on a third-party blog site, occasionally find reasons to talk about and link to your own domain.

6. Issue News Releases. Find newsworthy events and send news releases to print and Web periodicals in your industry. The links to your site in online news databases may remain for years and have some clout with link popularity. However, opening or redesigning a website is seldom newsworthy these days. Placing your website URL in online copies of your press release may increase link popularity some. Issuing press releases is a traditional promotional strategy, but there are other traditional approaches that can help you as well.

Traditional Strategies

Just because "old media" strategies aren't on the Internet doesn't mean they aren't effective. A mixed media approach can be very effective.

7. Include Your URL on Stationery, Cards, and Literature. This is a no-brainer that is sometimes overlooked. Make sure that all reprints of cards, stationery, brochures, and literature contain your company's URL. And see that your printer gets the URL syntax correct.

8. Promote using traditional media. Don't discontinue print advertising that you've found effective. But be sure to include your URL in any display or classified ads you purchase in trade journals, newspapers, yellow pages, etc. View your website as an information adjunct to the ad. Use a two-step approach: (1) capture readers' attention with the ad, (2) then refer them to a URL where they can obtain more information and perhaps place an order. Look carefully at small display or classified ads in the back of narrowly-targeted magazines or trade periodicals. Sometimes these ads are more targeted, more effective, and less expensive than online advertising. Consider other traditional media to drive people to your site, such as direct mail, classifieds, post cards, etc. TV can be used to promote websites, especially in a local market.

9. Create a Free Service. It's boring to invite people, "Come to our site and learn about our business." It's quite another to say "Use the free kitchen remodeling calculator available exclusively on our site." Make no mistake, it's expensive in time and energy to create free resources, but it is very rewarding in increased traffic to your site. Make sure that your free service is closely related to what you are selling so the visitors you attract will be good prospects for your business. Give visitors multiple opportunities and links to cross over to the sales part of your site.

E-Mail Strategies

Don't neglect e-mail as an important way to bring people to your website. Just don't spam. That is, don't send bulk unsolicited e-mails without permission to people with whom you have no relationship.

10. Install a "Signature" in your E-Mail Program to help potential customers get in touch with you. Most e-mail programs such as AOL, Netscape, and Outlook allow you to designate a "signature" to appear at the end of each message you send. Limit it to 6 to 8 lines: Company name, address, phone number, URL, e-mail address, and a one-phrase description of your unique business offering. Look for examples on e-mail messages sent to you.

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11. Publish an E-Mail Newsletter. While it's a big commitment in time, publishing a monthly e-mail newsletter ("ezine") is one of the very best ways to keep in touch with your prospects, generate trust, develop brand awareness, and build future business. It also helps you collect e-mail addresses from those who visit your site but aren't yet ready to make a purchase. Ask for an e-mail address and first name so you can personalize the newsletter

12. Send Offers to Your Visitors and Customers. Your own list of customers and site visitors who have given you permission to contact them will be your most productive list. Send offers, coupon specials, product updates, etc. Personalizing the subject line and the message may increase the results.

13. Rent targeted e-mail lists. We abhor "spam," bulk untargeted, unsolicited e-mail, and you'll pay a very stiff price in a ruined reputation and cancelled services if you yield to temptation here. But the direct marketing industry has developed targeted e-mail lists you can rent -- lists consisting of people who have agreed to receive commercial e-mail messages. These lists cost \$40 to \$400 per thousand or 4¢ to 40¢ per name. Do a smaller test first to determine the quality of the list. Your best bet is to find an e-mail list broker to help you with this project -- you'll save money and get experienced help for no additional cost.

Miscellaneous Strategies

14. Promote Your Site in Online Forums and Blogs. The Internet offers thousands of very targeted e-mail based discussion lists, online forums, blogs, and Usenet news groups made up of people with very specialized interests. Use Google Groups to find appropriate sources (groups.google.com). Don't bother with news groups consisting of pure "spam." Instead, find groups where a serious dialog is taking place. Don't use aggressive marketing and overtly plug your product or service. Rather, add to the discussion in a helpful way and let the "signature" at the end of your e-mail message do your marketing for you. People will gradually get to know and trust you, visit your site, and do business with you.

15. Announce a Contest. People like getting something free. If you publicize a contest or drawing available on your site, you'll generate more traffic than normal. Make sure your sweepstakes rules are legal in all states and countries you are targeting. Prizes should be designed to attract individuals who fit a demographic profile describing your best customers.

16. Ask Visitors to Bookmark Your Site. It seems so simple, but make sure you ask visitors to bookmark your site or save it in their Favorites list.

17. Exchange Ads with Complementary Businesses. Banner exchange programs don't work well these days. But consider exchanging e-mail newsletter ads with complementary businesses to reach new audiences. Just be sure that your partners are careful where they get their mailing list or you could be in trouble with the CAN-SPAM Act.

18. Devise Viral Marketing Promotion Techniques. So-called viral marketing uses the communication networks (and preferably the resources) of your site visitors or customers to spread the word about your site exponentially. Word-of-mouth, PR, creating "buzz," and network marketing are offline models. "Write Articles for Others to Use in their Newsletters," is a viral approach. The classic example is the free e-mail service, hotmail.com, that includes a tagline about their service at the end of every message sent out, so friends tell friends, who tell friends.

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Paid Advertising Strategies

None of the approaches described above is "free," since each takes time and energy. But if you want to grow your business more rapidly, there comes a point when you need to pay for increased traffic. Advertising is sold in one of three ways: (1) traditional CPM (cost per thousand views), (2) pay per click (PPC), and (3) pay per action, otherwise known as an affiliate program or lead generation program. Do some small tests first to determine response. Then calculate your return on investment (ROI) before spending large amounts. Here are some methods:

19. Buy a Text Ad in an E-Mail Newsletter. Some of the best buys are small text ads in e-mail newsletters targeted at audiences likely to be interested in your products or services. Many small publishers aren't sophisticated about advertising and offer attractive rates. Banner ads get such a low click-through rate (0.2%) these days that I don't recommend paying much for them. Banner ads typically cost about 50¢ to \$1 per thousand page views.

20. Begin an Affiliate Program. Essentially, a retailer's affiliate program pays a commission to other sites whose links to the retailer result in an actual sale. The goal is to build a network of affiliates who have a financial stake in promoting your site. If you're a merchant you, need to (1) determine the commission you are willing to pay (consider it your advertising cost), (2) select a company to set up the technical details of your program, and (3) promote your program to get the right kind of affiliates who will link to your site. Consider affiliate management software.

21. Purchase Pay Per Click (PPC) ads with Yahoo Search Marketing (formerly Overture) and Google AdWords. The top ads appear as featured links to the right of "natural" search engine results for your keywords. Your ranking is determined by how much you've bid for a particular search word compared to other businesses. This can be a cost-effective way to get targeted traffic, since you only pay when someone actually clicks on the link. Pay Per Click advertising can be quite cost-effective when you learn how to use it.

22. List Your Products with Shopping Comparison Bots and Auction Sites. Shopping bots compare your products and prices to others. Google's Google Base is free, so be sure to list your products there. Some work on a PPC basis: mySimon (www.mysimon.com), BizRate (www.bizrate.com), PriceGrabber (www.pricegrabber.com), and Shopping.com (www.shopping.com). Others expect a commission on the sale and sometimes a listing fee, especially sales systems that host the merchant. These include eBay (www.ebay.com), Yahoo! Shopping Auctions (<http://auctions.shopping.yahoo.com>), Amazon zShops, Marketplace, and Auctions (<http://zshops.amazon.com>), and Yahoo! Shopping (<http://shopping.yahoo.com>). You pay to acquire first-time customers, but hopefully you can sell to them a second, third, and fourth time, too.