



If You Build It, They Will Come

How to attract more customers with your company website.

BY DON KRESKI

A well-designed, well-laid-out website will tell a potential customer who you are and how you are better than your competitors, while including keywords for search-engine optimization.

Though our industry continues to do well in the economic downturn, a lot of AV integrators are asking themselves, “What do I need to do to keep the orders coming as buyers trim their capital budgets?”

An obvious question is the condition of your website. There’s no doubt that your site is the first place that potential customers will look when they try to evaluate your company. “It’s all about whether they can trust you to deliver on what you say you can do,” says Bill Mullin, vice president of Chesterton, Ind.-based distributor Starin.

“In any large-ticket sale, a series of confirmations must take place,” he says. “The first step is to sell them on your company. They’re not going to let you in the door until they see you as a credible supplier.”

From there, a series of assessments takes place: The customer evaluates you as you assess his or her needs and the requirements of the project. “If you do this properly, by the time it comes to making a decision, it’s already been made,” Mullin says.

An AV integrator’s website should be, at minimum, equivalent to a very well-done printed brochure. Like a brochure, it needs to tell who you are and how you are different and better than your competitors. That can be a tall order if you compete with a much larger integrator—say, an AVI-SPL or a Whitlock—or if you must deal with others constantly stressing price.

“Your website has a very important place in this process,” Mullin says. “Properly put together, it will help you gain the trust of your potential client.”

EFFECTIVE CONTENT WHEN THEY NEED IT

If you read my articles on marketing your site to the search engines, you know that an important step in designing or re-designing your website is optimizing its pages for the keywords potential customers use when searching for someone like you (see svconline.com/avcontrol/features/searchengine_optimization_1208).

This step is not important if your only goal is to have a site that builds credibility with people whom you have already contacted or who have been referred to you. You're missing opportunities, however, if you don't consider this additional step as well.

"We designed our site to inform people about who we are and what we do," says John Miles, president of Sound Vision, an AV integrator serving Chicago and northern Illinois. "We don't do any kind of hard sell. Nonetheless, the site has brought in some very large projects." The trick is to build pages that impress and inform readers while at the same time highlighting a limited number of appropriate keywords.

For example, if the training-room market is important to you, you may want to

build a page specifically addressing AV systems for training centers—perhaps with links to pages on individual training-room projects and other links to products or technical issues of interest to training managers. Each of these might appeal to training managers with different needs for information and highlight different sets of keywords. You'll want to illustrate all of these pages with professional-quality photos of your work in this market.

You will also want to avoid gimmicks in building these pages. Gary Ricke, who builds higher-end business-to-business sites as president of Orbis Web Design, cautions customers: "We build sites that use video and Flash, but with the idea of matching the media to the story that needs to be told. Clever graphics are not an end in itself. People go to the Web because they're looking for useful information."

If you can include very specific information of interest to your target customers, that can start to set your site apart from competitors. Starin, for example, has set up 42 brand-specific portal pages for its target customers: AV integrators and dealers. "Our goal is to make life very easy for our clients," Mullin says. "We've therefore assembled the most crucial information about each of our lines in one easy-to-access place." These portals each offer pricing and warranty information, specifications, promotions, sales tools, FAQs, and contact information. A password-protected section contains material meant for dealers only, including dealer pricing.

Sound Vision takes a similar approach with an Engineer's Corner that offers information of interest to IT and facilities managers, including articles explaining digital signal processing, HD videoconferencing, sizing displays, and the white-spaces controversy and how it affects wireless mics.

I personally walk potential clients through my own website, kreski.com, when I'm trying to explain what I can do for them. When I find myself having trouble illustrating a point, I start thinking about adding a page.

In the same way, Mullin suggests that one test of your website's potential appeal is whether your own people find it helpful when they're on the phone with clients. "No one knows it all, and that includes us," he says. "And nobody wants information until they need it. We used to do data dumps at dealer sales meetings, but we're finding it's a lot more effective to offer information resources that are available when they are most receptive because they have specific needs."

BUILDING YOUR SITE

One consideration in any website project is how much to do on your own and how much to outsource. Starin is large enough to have an inhouse marketing department, and the company does most, though not all, of the work on its website itself. Miles, on the other hand, says he feels an outside consultant is the way to go. "We considered a full-time marketing manager at one point, but it's much more cost-effective to outsource," he says. "It's also a question of focus. We're at our best designing and building AV systems, and that's where we need to concentrate our efforts."

This is not to say you can farm out everything. If you're building a truly informative site, there are some things that only you know how to communicate.

No matter how you build your website, you should expect to put a good statistical package in place so you can see where your traffic is coming from and which pages are of most interest to visitors. Very often your web-service provider can provide reports from a server-based package such as Webtrends. Google Analytics can provide better reports and is available for individual

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Gary Ricke, president of Orbis Web Design

sites at no charge, although you should expect to pay your developer to install and configure the package. With Analytics or a similar package installed, you can be confident that your new site is doing the job you expect it to do, or take steps to make sure that it does.

"There's no doubt that our site has enhanced our credibility with potential clients," Miles says. "And that's especially important in a day where so many companies are out there hammering price versus quality and service." **SVC**

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