

» Constructing (Reengineering) your "next generation" Web site



Characteristics of a "Next Generation" Web Site

When business-related Web sites first emerged in the early 1990s, they were typically seen as a ancillary adjunct to an organization's entrenched traditional business model. Most 1st generation Web sites simply echoed established corporate protocols and limited aspirations to that of reinforcing basic brand awareness and inviting the occasional sales inquiry. At the time, Web sites were seen primarily as a supplemental advertising vehicle, and not much more.

Fast forward to today's digital marketplace, modern Web sites no longer just promote the business, but rather they function as a direct and comprehensive working extension of the business itself. Your "online business" now reproduces and streamlines many of your most fundamental operational and communication interactions. More and more frequently, customers no longer perceive any significant difference between communicating with you through your Web site or e-mail versus interacting with your company through direct person-to-person contact.

Today's challenge (and opportunity) lies in your ability to translate traditional core business processes to a more responsive and more efficient online environment, through the construction of a "next generation" Web site.

» Comparison of 1st Generation and Next Generation Web Sites

1st Generation Web Site	"Next Generation" Web Site
The Web site is "secondary" to the organization's traditional ability to sell, deliver and support its products and services.	The Web site operates as a fully functioning extension of the organization, supporting and enhancing many of its core business processes.
Static Web Site Structure <i>Preformatted generic content written to be viewed equally by everyone at the same time.</i>	Dynamic Web Site Structure <i>Personalized, targeted content for individual audience members or groups, sometimes restricted by private password login.</i>
2-Dimensional Content Presentation <i>Primarily Text & Stationary Images</i>	Multi-Dimensional Content Presentation <i>Enhanced by Animation, Audio and Video Tools</i>
Content is produced and updated infrequently, as visitors are only expected to visit the Web site once or twice a year for general information purposes only.	Content is produced, shared and updated regularly, sometimes on an automated basis or retrieved at-need by the individual user with the aid of advance content search tools.
Content is created to serve a single, broad audience regardless of their individual needs or role.	Content is targeted to serve multiple audiences, including prospects, current customers, employees and associates, vendors, suppliers, etc.
Offers Only Limited, Single-Channel Interaction <i>Emphasizing Simple, Standard Message Forwarding or Basic Order Collection</i>	Supports Multi-Channel Interaction <i>Use of Intuitive Data Collection, Blogs, Social Networking, On-Demand Documents, Live Chat, Click-to-Call, Remote Whiteboard Sharing, Webcasts, etc.</i>
Designed only for basic desktop computer display	Designed for multiple display environments, including desktops, digital signage, cell phones, PDAs, GPS devices

Examine How Your Business Does Business

Before you overhaul your Web site, examine your current business practices and identify your primary communication tasks. Your next generation Web site should build upon those same activities. Once you have defined the unique core processes that drive your business in the off-line world, consider how you might reproduce, streamline and enhance those components utilizing the connectivity of the Internet.

Define your different audiences and consider how you might attract,

service, support and retain each of your individual groups online. Most 1st generation Web sites tend to focus only on a single audience group; typically, new prospects. A next generation Web site strategy should encompass and connect to each key player within your business model, including prospects, existing customers, employees, partners and influencers, media, vendors and others.

Recognize that modern Web sites are "multi-dimensional," exchanging different content with different audiences in different ways, all through an organized "web" of branded Web sites, landing pages, personalized data centers, e-mail, multimedia,

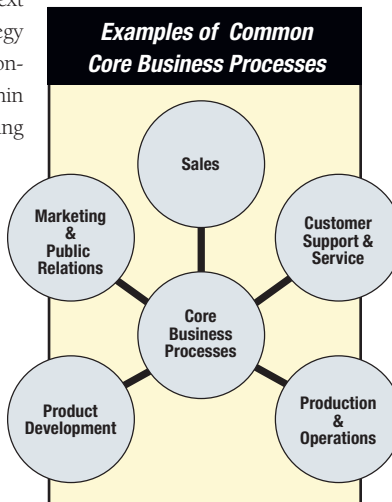
blogs, RSS feeds, and other vehicles. The key is to establish an active online communications channel for each group of participants that contribute to your business' success.

Consider your company's unique, competitive value proposition. What is the single most important reason individuals choose to do business with you instead of someone else? Whatever the answer, convey this quality clearly throughout your online business model.

For example, if your unique selling point is "location," post your address front and center on every page. Integrate Google Maps and Google Earth with primary content, demonstrating your proximity to key landmarks and travel lanes. Consider personalizing e-mail messages with the recipient's own specific driving distance to your store.

Determine how your audience will likely access your content. 1st generation Web sites were built with the assumption that visitors will view pages using

traditional desktop computers with 15" monitor screens. Today, Internet access provides a wider array of display and interaction scenarios, including wide screen monitors, Web-connected cell phones or other portable display appliances (PDAs), outdoor digital signage, GPS devices, and the list keeps diversifying. Internet content will be reconfigured to support emerging forms of interaction beyond the keyboard and mouse click, including use of a dial pad, toggle selector, voice command, and shortcuts like Click to Call and Live Chat.



Don't overlook peer collaboration and social networking opportunities, as well. New communication channels are available using free services as LinkedIn and Plaxo. Open communities, such as Facebook or YouTube can introduce you to new customers, while engagement services, like Twitter, can gauge immediate public feedback and test market impressions.

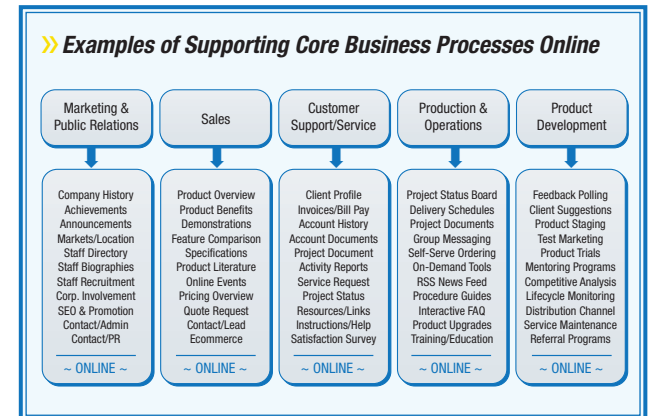
Replicating Your Core Business Processes Online

Marketing & Public Relations. (a) Instead of attempting to collect all Web site responses using a single lengthy generic contact form, offer several targeted shorter inquiry forms, positioned to serve your different audience communication needs instead—sales inquiry, employment inquiry, appointment request, investment inquiry, news/information inquiry, bill payment, account question, etc. (b) Invite visitors to register to receive e-mail alerts for news that interests them the most. (c) Convey your unique "corporate personality" by featuring brief, on-camera interviews with key company officers.

Sales. (a) Consider offering a step-by-step guide to help customers configure their own service packages from self-guided menus and then submit them for pricing confirmation and order processing. (b) Immediately connect online visitors to a knowledgeable sales representative through Live Chat, providing a non-threatening forum where prospects may immediately address specific sales questions. (c) Provide on-demand product demonstrations with pre-produced video presentations.

Customer Support & Customer Service. (a) Provide a personalized customer service profile page that contains the individual's account information and payment history, links to service request form(s) and self-serve resources. (b) Improve retention by appending a personalized satisfaction survey to all e-mail correspondence. Survey responses can be sent directly to stakeholders within your organization for one-to-one follow-up, while aggregate data is displayed in online dashboards to aid monitoring and issue management.

Production & Operations. (a) Create an interactive FAQ process, accepting and posting answers to frequently asked questions submitted by prospects, customers, staff and associates. (b) To support long-term projects, offer personalized dashboards to client and staff members posting assignments instructions and milestones directly to each desktop. (c) Provide cost-efficient online training events, using live Webcasts and Web-based reinforcement tests.



Product Development. (a) Encourage prospects to "design their own products and services" using a series of interactive questionnaires. Specialized requests could be quickly passed to the sales team, while more common requests could be considered for future product releases. (b) Create online user groups for your key products, inviting existing customers to join interactive discussion forums with your internal product developers.

Consider a Progressive, "Ramp-Up" Approach

With so many opportunities available to upgrade your Web site, the task might appear fairly daunting at first, especially given today's common workplace time and budget limitations. Consider rolling out new "next generation Web site" features, one at a time. Look again to your company's traditional core processes. Define those few activities that are the most essential to your different audiences, and build from there.

For example, to speed your organization's cash flow, introduce e-mail invoicing and online bill payment for your customers. Popular bookkeeping software, such as QuickBooks and Peachtree, offer built-in online capabilities at little or no extra cost. You may also easily add downloadable PDF copies of the customer's past statements and invoices, posted to a personalized and password-protected customer account profile page.

Learn As You Go

Encourage ongoing feedback from each audience group and be willing to make changes along the way. You can test ideas and modify your operation model more quickly and cost efficiently within your virtual business environment. Just remember that upgrades to your Web site should benefit both you and your user groups equally, to ensure that the new online process will be successfully adopted and produce the desired results.

Also remember to closely monitor your progress. Your Web site tool set provides simple ways to gauge your audience's response to various online initiatives. For instance, plot evolving "track records" for individual customers or sales prospects by automatically logging online interaction events within your contact relationship management (CRM) process. Categorizing responses to various online initiatives, offers, and opinion polling activities over time will help you to more accurately predict future buying patterns and common service needs.

Measure your next generation Web site's return on investment (ROI) by establishing simple benchmarks, such as comparing the cost of mailing printed correspondence to customers versus the cost and impact of sending one-to-one e-mail messages, and calculate your savings.

Your next generation Web site will help you gain greater insight about your customers and contributors, take advantage of evolving technologies, gain operational efficiency through self-service automation, and redefine and position your organization for future advancement.

This section is intended to highlight technology tips for tactical advantage in making businesses more competitive. This month's feature is presented by Kip Cozart, CEO of CC Communications, a Web design, programming and Internet media company; www.cccommunications.com; 704-543-1171. To submit substantive content ideas contact mary.lane@greatercharlottebiz.com.