BRAVE NEW WORLD

Reaching Customers Through the Internet

OVERVIEW

The Internet has changed everything. Music, books, shopping, banking, news, networking, sharing, everything. Add market fragmentation and mobile technology, and it's a Brave New World.

Unfortunately, it comes with new challenges, new problems. Like *How do I reach my customers?*

That used to be easy. Broadcast, print, direct response—proven methods that companies used to build brand awareness and generate sales. But times have changed. TV has fragmented, newspapers are going out of business, and unsolicited email is avoided at all costs.

Clearly, the Internet is the new media— but even it has evolved. In the beginning, it was all about "eyeballs." Websites were created as ad platforms. The goal was to attract as many visitors as possible–it didn't matter if they were really interested in the content on the site or not—suck them in by hook or by crook. More visitors, more money. When advertisers realized they were paying a lot for "eyeballs" that had little or no interest in their products, they switched to paying only for "click-throughs." Better, but the average click-through rate (CTR) has plummeted from 3% to .03% as Internet users have become numb to ads, clickable or not.[1]

Where are we now? Most Internet traffic is hit and miss (a lot of it gamed through SEO); ads have become almost useless.

Traditional advertising doesn't work anymore.

The Internet has changed, too. Eyeballs and click throughs are no longer effective.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY

The "community" model is the next stage in Internet marketing. What is a 'community?' A group of people that share a common interest. The scope of a community can be as broad as 'retirement planning' (which includes many people), or as narrow as 'scuba diving' (only a few). In both cases, community members look for online resources that help them accomplish their goals or enjoy their favorite pastimes.[2]

By sponsoring a community (related to your product) you create a platform where people come together to explore, learn, and share. Making the site engaging and helpful is the key. Publish meaningful stories and videos. Let visitors comment and discuss. Engage experts and offer practical advice. Conduct surveys and contests. Get people involved.

It's not about pitching products, it's about providing valuable information. It's about building credibility and trust.

In this scenario, SEO is used simply to bring new people to the site. If they like it—if it helps them—they'll come back. It's that simple. That is how an online community is built: one visitor at a time.

Is your product featured on the site? Of course it is. But not in the content. The content is not about product. Blogs, videos, webinars, ebooks, forums—the content is there to help visitors solve problems, understand options, make decisions. If they trust your content, they will trust your products.

Social media (like Twitter) is used to start conversations and get people talking about problems and solutions–all of which is specifically addressed in your content. That drives people to your website. Where they get good information. And see your products.

It's pretty simple: instead of wasting money on ads that don't work, spend it on helping your customers by building informative, engaging, community-oriented sites where they can find answers to their questions. They will leverage the resources you provide and thank you for it. They're more likely to buy your product if they think you have helped them than if they see your ad in the paper.

The community model is more complex, but more effective (you can build a community that features only your content), more predictable (you're not held hostage to the SEO arms race), and ultimately, more powerful (you are not just selling to your customers, you are helping them,building credibility and trust).

It's a new way to establish your credibility, show you want to engage, and prove your commitment to helping your customers. That's what will create customer loyalty. Indeed, customers for life.

THE NEW LANDSCAPE

From a marketing perspective, the community landscape is made up of three main pieces: content, SEO, and social media. All play a role in building and maintaining a community. Content brings people back again and again; SEO and social media bring new people to the site.

SEO is often portrayed as the Holy Grail of Internet marketing and an inordinate amount of time and energy goes into gaming search engines. But SEO is a just a part of building a community, not a strategy in and of itself.

Bringing new people to a community site is important, but the most valuable "new visitors" are referrals from existing community members (directly or through social media). They come, by definition, with an interest in the community and a positive predisposition.

If you are after anyone and everyone (i.e., you want to build traffic indiscriminately—because your site is an ad platform and you are selling "eyeballs" or "click-throughs"), then SEO is critical—but if you are only after people likely to join your community, SEO is only one of several tools, and not the most important.[3]

QUALITY CONTENT IS THE KEY

SEO and social media get all the headlines, but the heart of a community is high quality content. That's what brings people back again and again and keeps them on the site. It's what people talk about on social media; it's what the search engines look for (especially now).[4]

It's not hard to define quality. It's exactly what you would expect. If visitors find factual errors, the credibility of a site goes to zero. If the content is not engaging, few will slog through it. If it's not timely and relevant, no one will even look at it.

Quality means many things.

Engaging

Helpful

Relevant

Accurate

Timely

Substantive

Balanced

Creating high quality content is not simple or easy. Research. Interviews. Writing. Copyediting. Fact-checking. Photos. Graphics. It takes time to do it right and people notice if it's not. You can get new visitors through SEO and social media, but you can't build a community on one-time visitors.

The quality of your content reflects on your product.

Beware: The perceived value of the content will drive the perceived value of your product. If you post poor quality content (especially inaccurate information), then visitors will think your product or service is poor quality, too. The two go hand in hand—if you're not ready to make the investment in quality content, don't do it all.

There are other components to successful online communities, including site design, mobile-readiness, and linking with other key community resources, but content is the key. Get that wrong and nothing can save you.

PROOF OF CONCEPT

How do we know this model works? Because we have customers who do exactly what we have described and they have built dynamic, growing communities.
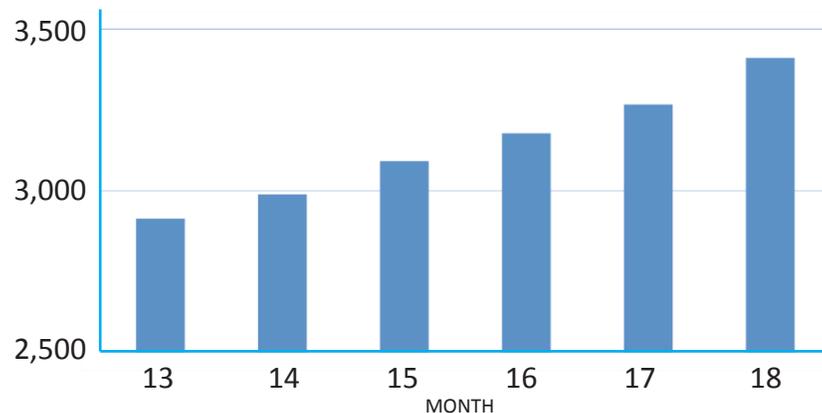
Over the last 18 months we built a community around Personal Finance for one of our clients. The site has reached almost 75,000 unique visitors/month (and still growing), many of which engage in contests, social media, and other community activities.

UNIQUE MONTHLY VISITORS

Traffic accelerates as the site gains traction.
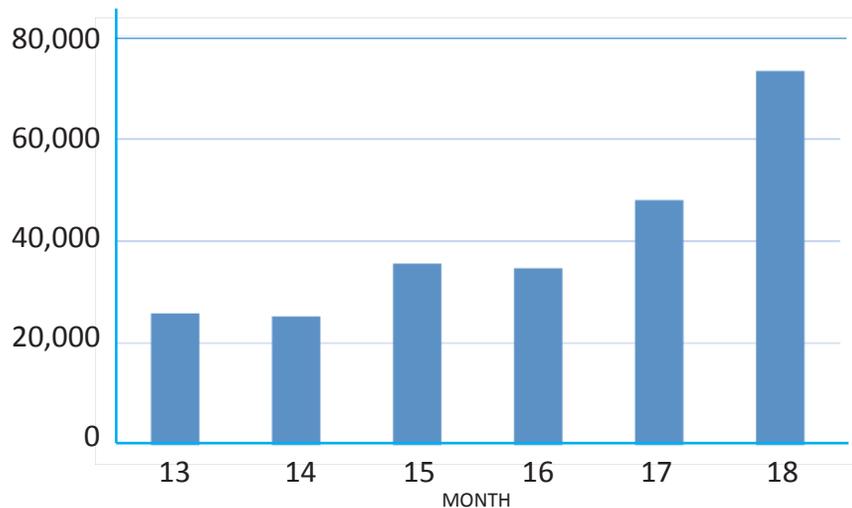
TWITTER FOLLOWERS

This client features their products "in context"—next to (but not in) the content that visitors come for (How To, What Does it Mean?, etc.). For the same customer, we have achieved an almost 1:1 ratio of tweets/retweets for the account, and the total

'reach' has expanded rapidly to over 1.5 million/month, proving the social media strategy is connecting with key players with strong presence.

These numbers are modest, but they prove the concept. For this client, we post blogs every day, dedicate 30 hours/week to Twitter, manage comments, and maximize SEO.

In addition we run contests, manage comments, and link the customer's content to similar content on other sites to increase exposure and drive link traffic. The results speak for themselves. The customer has created a semi-captive, appreciative community that is constantly exposed to their products and services.

It is possible to construct a viable community around virtually any subject/topic, build credibility and trust based on high quality content, and feature products "in context," where they mean something to the user and develop a new kind of "brand recognition" —as a community leader.

Harvard Business School recently published a blog entitled Advertisers Should Act More Like Newsrooms. Predicting the future of advertising, it concluded:

> "For messages to be heard in 2020, brands will need to create an enormous amount of useful, appealing, and timely content. To get there, brands will have to leave behind organizations and thinking built solely around the campaign model, and instead adopt the defining characteristics of the real-time, data-driven newsroom — a model that's prolific, agile and audience-centric."[5]

But they're wrong about 2020. It's happening now.

Will this model replace all traditional advertising? No. But it will become the dominant model for Internet marketing in the years ahead because it promises a number of things that no other medium can: credibility, measurability, and exclusivity. All for less than the cost of traditional advertising campaigns of unknown (and ever decreasing) effectiveness.

It doesn't matter if there is already a site for the subject most relevant to your products and services—the Internet is a big place. Build another one. Then make it better than the competition. How? Define "better" from your customers' perspective— high quality ever-changing content, a platform to share experiences, a ***community.*** That's what will keep people coming back to your site and seeing your product.

It all makes perfect sense: Help your customers instead of selling them and they will become customers for life—in the Brave New World.

Stop selling and start helping. (Sales will follow!)

[1] Click-through rates vary widely depending on ad type (banner, display, search), brand, and the offer itself, but LinkedIn reports its rate is .025%. For more information see *What is a Good Click Through Rate for PPC?* at: <http://www.clickz.com/clickz/column/2186867/click-rate-ppc>.

[2] Although there is no universally agreed-to definition of an online community, at least two features are considered to be essential: (1) content; and (2) some form of facilitated communication (i.e., forums, IM, etc.).

[3] According to Wordstream, paid ads on Google now dominate a number of categories. In some categories over 2/3 of click-throughs are on paid ads. See Wordstream Blog *The War on Free Clicks: Think No One Clicks on Google Ads? Think Again* at: <http://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2012/07/17/google-advertising>. Slingshot reports the number one search result on Google (organic) now has only an 18% click-through rate. See Slingshot Report at: <http://connect.slingshotseo.com/a-tale-of-two-studies-establishing-google-bing-click_through-rates>.

[4] When Google changed its algorithms to weed out poor quality content (the Panda & Penguin releases in 2011/2012, targeted at 'content farms'), they published a series of questions to help define 'quality' as the Google searchengine will evaluate it. See: *Google Blog on Quality Content* at: < http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/2011/05/more-guidance-on-building-high-quality.html>.

[5] *Advertisers Should Act More Like Newsrooms*, February 13, 2013. See the full HBR blog at: <http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2013/02/advertisers_need_to_act_more_like_newsrooms.html>.

Recommended Resources

1. ***What Is An Online Community?*** Social Media Today. August 24, 2011. < http://socialmediatoday.com/elliot-volkman/343142/what-online-community>.

2. ***5 Online Community Killers to Avoid at All Costs.*** Mashable. December 2, 2010. < http://mashable.com/2010/12/02/online-community-pitfalls/>.

3. ***6 Common Mistakes in Online Community Development.*** Convince & Convert. < http://www.convinceandconvert.com/brand-communities/6-common-mistakes-in-online-community-development>.

Ilyce Glink is a well-known real estate and personal finance expert whose radio programs and syndicated columns reach millions of people every week.

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