

Hostway Point of View

Small and Mid-Sized Business Web Sites

Early Signals and Emerging Trends



- Insights from Web Designers
- Specializing in Small-Business Sites

Advice for small businesses to effectively use their Web site.

June 2005
Hostway Briefing on:

***Small and Mid-Sized Business Web Sites
Early Signals and Emerging Trends***

Insights from Web Designers Specializing in Small-Business Sites

Hostway's June 2005 report on "***Early Signals and Emerging Web site Trends***" focuses on Web designers and passes along their insights about the new opportunities small businesses can take to increase effective use of their Web sites.

Selected from among Hostway customers who focus on helping small businesses design and construct Web sites, the chosen Web designers provide tips about new and noteworthy directions in which the Web is evolving – and they give advice about how you and your business can take advantage of those developments.

- *Alessandro and Karen Renzi of beyondus.com*
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Helping Design A New Generation Of Small-Business Web sites

Insights from Alessandro and Karen Renzi of www.beyondus.com

After leaving positions in Boston, where they worked with large corporate clients, Web designers (and Hostway customers) Alessandro and Karen Renzi moved their beyondus.com firm to Niagara Falls, NY, and shifted their focus to helping small companies develop effective ways to use their Web sites.

“A Web site can be an immense tool for small businesses to interact with their clients and to expand their business,” says Alessandro, whose clients include not only firms in the greater Boston area and the Buffalo-Niagara region, but also across the U.S.

Hostway recently caught up with Alessandro and Karen, who shared their insights on the changes that they are seeing in small-business Web sites. These include:

- **Emphasis On Sites That Can Easily Grow And Evolve**
- **Greater Focus On Specific Populations of Site Visitors**
- **Beginning To Make Judicious Use Of Flash**
- **Weaving SMB Web Sites Into Business Operations**

Emphasis On Sites That Can Easily Grow And Evolve

At many firms, the initial efforts to put together and launch the company’s first Web site do not take into account the need to make changes in content and site structure – and to enable the site to evolve over time.

More specifically, the initial sites at many companies “did not build a design shell; instead, they tried to make each page unique,” says Alessandro. “The result was that, when they wanted to do an update or make a change, they had to work separately on every page, instead of being able to use ‘find and replace’ types of features.”

As time has passed, Web site and content management have become important issues for sites big and small. The result is greater emphasis on Web design and architecture that makes it simpler to manage content and easier for the site to grow and evolve.

“We first applied these approaches to the Web sites 10 pages and larger, but today we even build a 5-page Web site with these things in mind. Even if we are building a one-page or two-page Web site, we implement these ideas right off the bat,” says Alessandro.

“All sites get much bigger than when they started,” says Alessandro. “Within a year or two, a 5-page Web site can easily become a 20-page Web site, and it is important to lay an initial foundation that can accommodate that growth.”

Greater Focus On Specific Populations of Site Visitors

Another shift that Alessandro and Karen are seeing is that their clients are putting more emphasis on Web site design and features that are targeted to serve more specific populations of Web visitors.

“One of our clients offers four different types of training services to two very different segments,” says Karen. “One set of visitors is corporate buyers who are purchasing for their businesses. The other visitors are individual consumers who making purchases for themselves.”

The beyondus.com client’s original idea was to organize the information on the site around separate pages for each of the four services. However, a closer look at the two key customer segments found that corporate and consumer prospects were likely to have different information needs.

For example, one difference was that consumers tended to buy only one service at a time, but the corporate buyers were likely to include all four services in a single purchase.

Under the original site plan, this meant that, “If you were a corporate customer and you wanted all four services, you would have to click on four separate pages and you would have to read each and every page,” says Karen.

Instead, the site plan was reworked so that the business user, who is likely to want all four services, was given the option of clicking on a “business” link that led to a single page that provided information about all four services. Other customers, who were interested in only one of the services, had the option of going to a page that was devoted entirely to information about that specific service.

“It kept the number of pages about the same, but it represented a different way of delivering the information to the two different types of customers,” says Karen.

Beginning To Make Judicious Use Of Flash

“One big change is that we are starting to use Flash within our Web sites, but trying to not get carried away,” says Alessandro. “There are sites that are 100% Flash, and there is no question about it: Flash can make a site much more beautiful, much more dynamic. There is animation, there is sound. Everything.”

One big problem with Flash, however, is that “for a small business that is trying to get spotted by search engines, you can end up shooting yourself in the foot if your site is built in Flash. Flash can make it almost impossible for search engines to pick up your site,” says Alessandro. “Search engines don’t care about images, they are interested in text.”

As a result, use of Flash on a home page can cause search-engine problems. On the other hand, “What Flash does is that it lets you present content in a different way – but it needs to be something that has value and is not just there for the ‘ooh’ factor,” says Alessandro.

For example, the beyondus.com designers are looking at ways that one of their clients, Bedworks, could use Flash to show how various fabrics that they offer might look on a couch; so that a Web visitor, “could see the couch with the fabric,” says Alessandro.

Weaving SMB Web Sites Into Business Operations

Alessandro and Karen also point to one other trend that they have been seeing: SMBs are weaving closer integration between their Web sites and their business operations.

A growing number of companies no longer see their Web sites as something that is cobbled onto their business; increasingly, the Web site is becoming a hub for more of their business operations and activities.

“We are doing more than just designing the Web site; but also helping put together the content and do cross-functional efforts that incorporate the marketing programs that are going to work with the Web site,” says Karen.

“More and more, a Web site is becoming a company’s business card,” adds Alessandro. “A lot of people don’t ask for your business card, they ask for the URL for your Web site. When prospective customers want to get familiar and comfortable with a company, they go to the Web site to learn about it – and that makes having a professional Web site really important because it can have a big impact on your credibility,” Karen adds.

For examples of Hostway customers who have been clients of beyondus.com, check out:

- www.inkteczone.us
- www.colmarequipment.com
- www.businessofhollywood.com
- www.safaribooksonline.com

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Focusing On More Than Just The Web Site

Insights from Alan Segal of www.offswitch.com

Even more than in the offline world and especially for small businesses, online success depends on finding new ways to use the Web as a powerful tool to share information – with customers, with business partners, and within an organization, says marketing expert and Web designer (and Hostway customer) Alan Segal of the offswitch.com consulting firm.

“Small businesses are realizing that on the Web you cannot – and shouldn’t even try to – stand alone,” says Alan, whose involvement with the Web dates back to when he was chosen to be the first creative group head for interactive media at the Saatchi & Saatchi ad agency in Los Angeles in 1995.

Hostway recently caught up with Alan, who shared his insights on the changes that he is seeing in small-business Web sites. These include growing emphasis on:

- **Giving People Many Ways to Find Your Web Site**
- **Earmarking One-third of Your Web Site Budget for Traffic Generation**
- **Partnering With Other Firms To Serve Customers Via The Web**
- **Using The Web To Share Information With Customers And Prospects**
- **Using The Web To Share Information With Members of Your Team**

Giving People Ways to Find Your Web Site

“More and more businesses are realizing that people are not going to find you on the Web unless they specifically look for you or come across links to you – and that giving people ways to find you is crucial,” says Alan.

Too often, small businesses have launched their Web sites and then wondered why they were not getting traffic from people who are searching on Google and Yahoo.

For example, Alan has been working with a realtor in Orange County, California, who was puzzled that prospective customers were not finding him when they used search engines to locate realtors.

“The answer was not simply to put more keywords and meta tags in your pages,” says Alan. “We could put in words like “Orange County,” “realty,” “property,” and “mortgage,” but how many other Web sites have those?”

If you want to get higher search engine rankings, Alan advises, “You need to be linking to a lot of other sites and linking from a lot of other sites. You need to get into community Web sites, you need to find other small businesses like yours, and work out reciprocal linking.”

Not only will people start clicking to your site through the reciprocal links, but search engines also measure how many other sites are pointing toward you, and the reciprocal links will raise your rankings.

“Even if you just put together your own directory of useful links to third-party resources, your site can become a community utility site to which other sites might want to link,” suggests Alan.

The approach taken by another offswitch.com client illustrates the opportunities that the Web provides for partnering with other firms.

“The client does custom woodworking, custom built-ins for homes, and I have been working to help align them with realtors, developers, and other businesses who would benefit from linking with one another,” says Alan. “Small business Web sites need to develop traffic-building and linking strategies. You need to have a lot of paths to your door.”

Earmarking One-third of Your Web Site Budget for Traffic Generation

Based on these types of considerations, Alan says, “When a customer talks to me about building a site, I tell them to try to earmark about a third of their budget – 25 to 35% – for generating traffic and buying better search-placement or advertising.”

This can include newspaper advertising, online banner ads, and search engine optimization for your site, or arranging or buying links to your site from other Web sites.

“Anything you can do to build awareness of your site helps,” says Alan. “Just being on the Web is not an endall.”

Using The Web To Share Information With Customers And Prospects

Another trend is that, “People are expecting more and more content and more and more repository of knowledge on the Web sites that they visit,” says Alan. “They expect to be able to find a PDF of anything that was ever created that used to be in print. If it can be put into a PDF and downloaded, why isn’t it on your site?”

Consider the example of an offswitch.com client that serves as a San Francisco-area ad representative for a group of national magazines.

“People who want to buy ads in the magazines that he represents need to be able to come to the site and find the media kit – a downloadable PDF of the media kit,” says Alan. “A prospective advertiser wants to know what a quarter-page ad costs, what the editorial calendar is for the coming year.”

Increasingly, “The site becomes a utility, like a virtual administrative assistant. Rather than have to contact the ad rep directly to request information, customers and prospects can just go to the Web site and download the media kit.”

Of course, “Some information might be behind password [protected] areas, because you might not want to give some of that information to your competition,” says Alan.

Using The Web To Share Information With Members of Your Team

Finally, a growing number of small businesses are also using the Web to provide better internal access to that highly valuable company asset: its knowledge and intellectual property.

“You no longer have intellectual property living on a lot of people’s hard drives,” says Alan. Instead, organizations are creating knowledge repositories and making them available via the Web.

“If a sales person happens to be in Detroit talking to a client, and they thought they were going to be talking about subject A, but subject B comes up, the sales person can just go to the repository, download the white paper, PowerPoint deck, catalog, or whatever, and just present it immediately,” explains Alan.

“The idea of having easily accessible, distributed information is becoming more and more of an expectation.”

[Note from Hostway: Since January 2005, we have been offering our customers the option of signing up for Microsoft SharePoint, an easy-to-use, Web-based collaboration tool for small- to medium-sized businesses that makes it easier to create, manage, build, and use collaborative Web sites. For more information, go to <http://www.hostway.com/smb/sharepoint>.]

For examples of Hostway customers who have been clients of offswitch.com, check out:

- <http://www.mediacentricinc.com/>
- <http://www.thorhanson.com/>

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Helping Racecar Drivers Flash Around The Web

Insights from Steve Elliott of www.Elliottbrand.com

When Web designer (and Hostway customer) Steve Elliott first used Macromedia's Flash technology in a motor sport site that he built a couple of years ago, it was as though someone had said, "Drivers, start your Web sites."

"As soon as I launched that site, I started getting contacts from other racecar drivers," recalls Steve. "Even now, as soon as I launch another site, more people get in touch with me."

You can find links to the Flash-enabled sites of www.bostonreid.com, www.levijones.com, www.tonyhunt.com, www.dakodaarmstrong.com, and others at his Elliottbrand.com Web site. And, if the forecasts are right that growing broadband penetration in the U.S. is beginning to trigger an increase in Flash use by sites, the pedal-to-the-metal embrace of the technology by Steve's racecar drivers is a harbinger of a new type of look and feel that is likely to be spreading across the Web.

Hostway recently caught up with Steve, who shared his Web site building insights.

Flash Is a Powerful Tool, But Beware of Speed Limits

"HTML puts a big limit on how creative you can be; Flash removes a lot of those HTML limits. Just about anything you can imagine, you can do," says Steve, whose business motto is "Changing The Way You View The Web."

Steve does warn that, "With Flash, right now, you have to be careful about download time. A lot of my clients want people to be able to go to the site with a dial-up modem and not have to sit there and wait much more than a minute for the file to download. It still is a relatively big issue.

"But, if a client wants the Web site to be geared to a high-bandwidth user, then we can be a lot more creative; we can have a larger file size. As more and more people are going to high-speed, the file size and download times are going to be less and less of an issue."

Why Racecar Drivers Want Web Sites

"Most of the drivers in motor sports realize that they need a Web site," says Steve.

For high-profile NASCAR drivers, Web sites serve as useful publicity and marketing tools. They also can directly generate revenue by serving as a channel for selling branded merchandise such as T-shirts.

But Web sites also can be important for drivers early in their careers. One key reason: having a Web site makes it easy for NASCAR teams to get background information about young drivers.

"Web sites give drivers a way to showcase their talent to higher-level teams that are looking for drivers.

It is a way for the drivers to get their names out. Drivers put their Web site information on business cards, on their cars and on their uniforms. Teams and sponsors can go to the drivers' Web sites at their convenience, 24 hours a day, when they want to learn about the drivers.

“Whether the drivers are trying to pick up a sponsorship or if they want to get a ride with a top-level sprint-car team – or higher – [Web sites] provide a way for organizations to learn about the drivers.”

Steve’s Flash-enabled Web sites also appeal to drivers for another reason.

“Drivers want their Web sites to be different and catchy so that, when visitors go to the site, they are going to remember it, and they are going to tell other people ‘Check this out,’” says Steve. “After all, race drivers are real competitive.”

For examples of Hostway customers who have been clients of Elliottbrand.com, check out:

- www.bostonreid.com
- www.levijones.com
- www.tonyhunt.com
- www.dakodaarmstrong.com

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