

Beyond SEO:

driving customer
attraction, retention,
and top-line growth

**Does your website speak to
your customers and fulfill
your business objectives?**

By Jeffrey Bean and Sean Van Tyne

Businesses frequently want an evaluation of their websites—mostly to know how they compare to the competition. Based on our experience, most businesses are disappointed with their website's ability to convert visitors to loyal customers. In fact, many people say they aren't really sure what their website does for them.

To assess and enhance website effectiveness, it's interesting to consider how they got to the point they are in the first place. Most websites are developed by outside web developers or creative professionals. Some developed internally—typically with little or no prospect or “demand side” information. Many use the website-in-a-box approach, reassign an existing Intranet, or copy their approach (if not their content) from a competitor in order to speed uptime.

Two critical components *are* usually missing at this juncture: connecting with the markets that are served and providing a great user experience for website visitors.

Too few companies leverage the view of their strengths and weaknesses, distinctive capabilities, or demand-side (user) requirements when developing their websites. When this happens, both content and technology—such as streaming video and webcasts—are often disconnected from the needs of the business and the site visitors.

Optimize your website business performance and user experience

In recent years, many executives frustrated with their websites have been told that investing in search engine optimization (SEO) should be their next step in making the most of their website's performance. While some business owners and leaders have noticed improvements, most are still not sure that this effort truly optimizes the website for their business.

What they are sure of is that SEO can be very expensive. At this stage, it is common to hear CEOs and business owners ask, “We have spent all this money on SEO, is there anything beyond spending even more money on SEO to maximize the contribution of our website?”

The answer is “Yes!”



Four steps to optimize website business performance and the user experience

There are four critical steps businesses should take to make their websites more compelling to their target audience:

- **Understand the market first.** Find out what prospects value—before you put up content and push it out to the market.
- **Specify the business purpose of the website.** Know the market problem your site will solve and which parts of the business you want to accelerate.
- **Develop the user experience strategy and design.** Map the market and business needs to the solution's design; ensure consistent brand and messaging throughout the design.
- **Measure the design against the objectives.** Validate that customers' needs are met and tasks are easy to do; test with people who fit the profile of your target customers.

Understand the market



The way the website communicates what the company *does for* the prospect or customer is more important than what your company actually does. Do not put up content and then push it out. Find out what the prospects really value about your products or services and how they want it described. Call these your “Do Fors.” Then apply the Do Fors directly to the development of the site along with the rest of the content reflecting what prospects value.

This type of user intelligence is critical in transitioning the website from an accessory to a true business asset. This information may be acquired through a number of methods such as collecting existing demographic or psychographic (lifestyle) information, purchasing reports about the market and competition, close examination of internal sales or customer data, or surveying people that match the target website users.

If the solution is business-to-business, the same approach can be applied by taking into account the requirements, processes and success measures of the businesses being served.

Specify the business purpose



When you know the problem your site helps you solve, the content better addresses the needs of prospects and customers in the market. This “two-way connection” is based on developing a solid view of the website users—new prospects, clients, suppliers, etc., including:

- Who they are
- What they need
- What they want
- How they want it
- Their willingness to pay for it

Unfortunately website business missions are frequently not included in the development process. They are sometimes detached from the real challenges and desired acceleration points of the business. Many times the roles of the website are either too vague or are left languishing for so long their value is obsolete.

Develop the user experience



The user experience encompasses all aspects of a visitor's interaction with the company's services, products, and website. It is critical to the company's success to provide excellent prospect and customer experiences. This objective puts the user at the center of the design process—incorporating user concerns and advocacy from the beginning—and dictates that the needs of the user should be foremost in any design decisions.

To meet the exact needs of the customer and to deliver simple, elegant solutions that are a joy to experience goes beyond giving customers what they say they want and merely providing a checklist of features. You must have a strong understanding of your market needs and the target audience of your solution. You must also map the market and business needs to the solution's design.

Ensure consistent brand and messaging throughout the design. In many regards, your user experience is your brand. You must develop an understanding of what motivates your users and manage their expectations while consistently representing your brand and message throughout their experience with your company, services, and products.

Measure the design

Validate that customers' needs are met and tasks are easy to do. Putting your solution in context for your customers and users, is key to validating that the solution meets their needs and is easy to use. You need to work with people who fit the profile of your target customers and conduct design reviews to gather feedback. Develop prototypes to review concepts to ensure that your site meets customer and user needs. Also validate where workflows and content for various customer segments overlap and differ. Start thinking about the right experience to support the different market segments and users' needs.

Once you have validated that the site meets customer and user needs, you can then evaluate the tasks to ensure that they are easy to complete. It is a test of the ease of use of the solution and *not* the intelligence of your customers. If the tasks are hard or impossible to complete, then your solution is not easy to use.

Website business missions



Develop a specific mission for your website—before investing the technical and creative talent, time, and money in the build. Here are some examples of actual website business missions:

- Reduce time-to-market and time-to-revenue
- Generate qualified leads
- Expand product and service reach while reducing our costs
- Target a previously unreachable customer
- Allow partners to more easily do business with us
- Establish or increase credibility
- Transact business
- Attract and retain new customers
- Convert visitors to customers
- Increase customers' loyalty and spending

Quick cases in point

In pursuit of new business, a small consulting firm was frequently asked if they had a website. Based on the demand-side information and needs of the business, the three missions of the website were to:

- Establish company credibility
- Be an easy-to-use networking tool
- Provide those working at the company with an easy-to-access, anywhere sales presentation

During the tweak-and-tune phase, feedback from those who closely matched the ideal client profile said they wanted more background information and company case studies, and these sections were lengthened and reformatted. These efforts resulted in a 50% increase in clients within 120 days. Interestingly, since these steps were implemented, the background information and case studies are the most frequently viewed pages.

In another case, a five-year-old high-growth financial services firm was getting little value from its website. Support costs increased, SEO return on investment had flattened, and the site's contributions to the business were down.

The company developed a better understanding of the markets they served—prospects did not want to read about specifications, but *how* the financial services being offered could solve *their* problems (The Do Fors). The owners decided to make the website missions about: solving problems for prospects and making it easier for clients to engage with the company. The results showed a 25% increase in clients over the following six months. The site now serves the company as a qualification tool and distribution channel—and the cost to reach these new clients has decreased by 10%.

Conclusion

Only via a thorough understanding of your market, customer's needs, and specific business objectives for the website can you take meaningful and complementary steps beyond SEO. Follow-up by executing a user experience strategy and design process that provides an engaging and differentiating visitor experience, and you will be taking major steps toward measurable customer attraction, retention, and top-line growth for your company.

TPM



Jeffrey Bean, Principal, Del Mar Research & Consulting, assists clients in defining and achieving their next level of growth with specialized marketing and business development. Contact Jeffrey at JBean@DelMarResearch.com. For more information visit www.DelMarResearch.com



Sean Van Tyne, AVP User Experience, LPL Financial, solves business-critical problems where people intersect with technology. Sean is: the current President of the User Experience Special Interest Group, www.uxsig.org; a member of the Board of Advisors for UXnet, www.uxnet.org; and advisor on a number of professional and corporate boards. Contact Sean at Sean@VanTyneConsulting.com