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WEB TECHNOLOGY IN MARKETING

Every independent professional should have a web site, an ezine, and an email marketing strategy, right? If you're not taking maximum advantage of web technology to market your professional services, you are behind the times, and missing out on huge opportunities. At least that's what most marketing experts would have you believe. But how valid is this advice? And is it for everyone?

Before email was widely available, marketing newsletters were printed on paper and sent by mail. There's no question that e-mail is a more economical solution for sending a newsletter. Instead of being able to afford only a few hundred newsletters at a cost of $1 or more each, you can send tens of thousands for only pennies. With an ezine, technology can save you money and allow you to extend your marketing reach. This is one of the many ways that web technology can be your friend. Here are some others:

• A web site can attract new customers to your business from across the street or far outside your local area. If your site has high rankings in the search engines under appropriate categories, or many links from keywords prospective clients might search for, you may get dozens of inquiries from people who otherwise would never hear of you.

• Using email autoresponders can help you automate your follow-up with likely prospects. Just subscribe a prospect to an autoresponder list once, then send periodic broadcasts to the whole list, encouraging prospects to hire you or attend your learning programs.

• Participating in online discussion lists and message boards can allow you to network with a large group of people in your target market without leaving your home or office. Appearing on live chats or webinars permits you to be a public speaker without the time and expense of travel, and speak to national or global audiences.

For these reasons and more, it appears that using web technology is an affordable way to reach prospective clients easily. You can potentially attract larger numbers of prospects for fewer dollars than with many more traditional methods of outreach. But there are pitfalls.

Broadcast email can be an efficient solution for following up with prospects

who already know about you. But it's a terrible way to introduce yourself to a prospect for the first time. Far too many coaches, consultants, trainers, and other professionals add subscribers to their ezine or autoresponder lists without their permission. Not only is this ineffective as a marketing strategy since most readers simply delete e-mail from people they don't recognize, but it can seriously backfire when someone is offended by your unsolicited mail.

Here are some other ways that using technology in marketing can become your foe:

• Technology makes it easy to hide. When you have a web presence, an ezine, and use e-mail auto responders to contact your customers, you may think there's no reason to contact them in person. You may feel justified in not picking up the phone, attending a business event, or suggesting a lunch date if you think your technology is doing the job for you. But a web site or e-mail isn't an equal substitute for a prospect hearing your voice or seeing your face. It's pretty rare for someone to hire a professional without talking to him or her first, so if you put off the talking, you may also be putting off the hiring.

• Launching and maintaining an attractive and useful website, and achieving high search engine rankings for it, can be an expensive and time-consuming project. Unless you pay close attention to your budget, you can easily find yourself spending much more to land each client than you would ever pay using offline marketing methods. A high-traffic web site is a valuable resource for a business that can take advantage of a global presence or a large volume of new clients. But if your business is primarily local or you only need a few new clients each year, you may end up paying for a level of visibility you don't really need.

• Too many inquiries from the web can waste your time. Anonymous visitors to your site will often email to ask about prices and other details. These inquiries are completely unqualified -- you don't know anything about the people who are writing. If you take the time for a thorough reply to each one, they can consume a significant amount of energy. On the web as well as off, prospects who are referred to you by people who know your work are much more likely to hire you than those who find you by accident. If that's so, perhaps it makes sense to put more effort into building referrals than into building a broader web presence.

Web technology is really no different than any other method of marketing your services in that you must judge the appropriateness of each strategy for your unique circumstances. If you find writing to be a chore, perhaps a regular ezine is

not the best choice for you. If you only need a few large, local clients each year, you may want a web site for prospects to explore after you contact them, but not spend your money on web directory listings or search engine optimization. Autoresponder reminders may be effective to increase enrollment in public workshops, but not such a good idea to sell in-house training to corporations.

Just because a strategy is the latest and greatest doesn't mean it's the best. Publishing a blog may be terrific if your target market spends a lot of time online, but not so good to reach those who rarely open their browser. Webinars can be an effective tool for attracting high-tech or corporate clients, but not for home business owners or consumers who operate older, slower computers with dial-up Internet access.

Relying completely on technology to bring in clients can also give you a false sense of productivity. When you are writing copy for your web site or setting up autoresponders, you feel like you are taking action about marketing. And these activities can be important behind the scenes steps, but you shouldn't confuse them with direct outreach to prospective clients. Web copy won't make any sales until people see it, and autoresponders will have no effect until people are subscribed to them.

Web technology provides just another set of marketing tools, not a complete solution. Using every marketing tool the web has to offer is not a requirement of doing business. The purpose of your marketing should be to bring you enough clients to earn the level of profit you desire. When marketing technology adds to your bottom line, it's worth employing. When it doesn't, there's no reason to use it.