

# How to Get People to Surf into Your Site and Respond

by Michel Fortin

A successful Web site is an extremely effective sales tool since it has the ability to gain the attention of a captive audience. Like all direct response marketing processes, it must first hook a reader's attention and then move them to take some action. However, when the mechanics of that very first page are ignored, it often causes visitors to click out of a site from the moment they arrive. And such Web sites, although some of which get a large number of hits, never seem to produce the anticipated level of response let alone deeper traffic.

This article does not focus on traffic-building specifically or on the programming elements of a good first page (such as HTML, meta-tags, frames, scripts, graphics, style sheets, ad nauseum), but on its content, copy, looks, and consistency that will captivate the attention of today's leery and discerning audience. It is to move them to surf further into the site and ultimately to the sale -- and it all starts with the first page.

With just a few changes, you can turn your Web site into a more compelling and effective sales tool. Remember that every single day, your customers are bombarded with a continuous flow of information and marketing messages, and that competition for their attention is exceedingly fierce. A Web site that captures their attention and stays active in your customer's mind will not only have them visit deeper into your site and generate sales but also have them visit your site again and again as well as refer your site to others.

Here are some basic rules to follow when designing a front page:

## **Be Focused**

Target your market! As the adage goes, "You can not be all things to all people." You can, however, position your site effectively to meet the needs of a specific group. It's a paradox but you will indeed get more with less. This means understanding who your customers/visitors are and what motivates their buying decisions. Therefore, do your homework. Know your customer. Appeal to their specific needs, wants, and psyche. Focus like a laser on your niche and, consequently, your site will burn into their minds.

Web sites centered on a very narrow theme or idea will create visitors of greater interest, and especially leads that are much more pre-qualified and apt to buy. Look at it this way: When you narrow down your message and focus on a niche, visitors will be 50% sold the minute they hit your site's first page. Then, it is up to your content (copy, offer, and call-to-action) to take them through the remaining 50%.

Niche marketing on the Web is particularly important since people do not have the time to sift through an entire site -- let alone a search engine or even the Internet for that matter -- to find exactly that for which they are looking. If your site is unique, highly specialized, and focused however, people will be inclined to surf deeper into your site once they hit the first page.

When focusing on a niche, the content of your site's first page will be far more credible than the mere see-through puffery of one's own blatant promotional message. Nevertheless, if you cater to a particular audience, it will then be easier for your first page to lead visitors to a successful outcome because, once they hit your site, they are in fact pre-qualified.

## **Be Specific**

Answer this skill-testing question: "What exactly do you want your visitors to do?" Simple, isn't it? But it doesn't seem that way with the many sites I've visited. The KISS principle (that is keep it simple and straightforward) is immensely important on the 'Net. An effective Web site requires some planning -- it starts with a clear objective that will lead to a specific action or outcome. If your site is not meant to, say, sell a product, gain a customer, or obtain an inquiry for more information, then what exactly must it do? Work around the answer as specifically as possible. In short, have a plan when you design your site's front page.

Don't be vague. For instance, is your Web site meant to be like a résumé or billboard that only advertises the fact that you are "open for business"? It shouldn't, unless you are intimately involved with that specific medium (i.e., you are a Web designer or host, or in other words your site is the product in itself). If not, is it

to generate qualified leads? Is it to sell a particular product? Are you trying to persuade your visitors to switch from another company to you? Do you want them to call you on the phone for more information? Are you trying to have them subscribe to some membership program? You get the picture.

The mind hates confusion. If you try to get your visitors to do too many things, especially on the front page, they will do nothing. However, if you want to offer a visitor a variety of different options, then try to focus on one alone and create a secondary page (or more) that are each respective to a particular action, and then link them together at the appropriate locations for flow. In essence, keep your message focused. Do not try to communicate too much -- you will overwhelm the reader. Use one major theme and revolve your message around it.

### **Be Clear**

When you are in the process of buying a book, for instance, the one thing that has attracted you is the cover (if you're not aware of the author beforehand, and even then the cover plays a key role). If the proverb "Don't judge books by their covers" exists, it is because we, as humans, have the natural inclination to do so. Newspapers capitalize on that intrinsic human behavior, which is why front-page headlines, pictures, and news articles are always carefully selected. In fact, the most read part of a newspaper is not only the front page but also the top section (or what is commonly referred as "above the fold"). Web sites are no different.

Therefore, the front page of your site is "the cover of your book," so to speak. It should entice readers to surf further into the site and not lead them to take action right then and there (unless your site is a single page). On the front page, keep your copy short (or its major benefit "above the fold") and to the point, allowing the reader to quickly understand what's in it for them. Use bold, attention-grabbing headlines and subheadlines (even surheadlines) to emphasize the major theme and the core benefit that your site offers.

In fact, list the benefits. Why should a visitor surf your site? What's in it for him/her? In other words, focus on communicating to the visitor the reasons why they should browse further. A great technique for doing so is to use a bullet list of benefits (such as when it follows the words "With this site, you get," "in this site, you will find," "by visiting this site, you will learn," or "here are the reasons why you should browse this site").

As I wrote in another article, "[How to Blend Bullets and Benefits to Boost Buyers](#)", bulleted benefit lists not only give a visual break for the reader but are also appealing and effective since they are short, to-the-point, and clustered for greater impact. Remember that customers buy benefits and not products. Therefore, your first page should focus on the benefits of your site and not its features. It must give specific reasons for surfers to venture further.

Present a problem and emphasize it. Focus on an existing gap (the gap between a problem and its solution). And then show what your site brings to the table by telling your visitors how, by surfing deeper, they will be able to fill that gap. In other words, the first page must confirm that there is a problem and how exactly you can solve it by surfing deeper into your site.

### **Be Simple**

Unlike the TV or radio, computers are still not considered as household items (not yet, anyway). While they are well on their way, the computer as well as the Internet are still in their infancy. Earlier, less capable browsers as well as slower modems are still the norm. If your site includes too much background, Javascript, frames, plugins, and dazzling memory-intensive graphics in an effort to impress, it will be counterproductive. Many potential sales are lost due to a slow-loading, unbrowsable Web site.

Your site should download fast. Research by an on-hold phone message marketing company found that people start hanging up when put on hold for more than 30 seconds. The Internet is no different. If they have to wait for more than 30 seconds for your page to load, visitors will leave. In short, if they have to wait, they won't.

Often, people say that our society has entered the "information revolution." Not so. It's the "access to information" revolution. The ability to retrieve information in nanosecond speed is the underlying drive behind the Internet. For instance, that same ability has caused entire layers of middle managers to be wiped out. Therefore, anything that slows that ability down (such as having a front page over 30-40 kilobytes in size), especially when compared to other, quicker-loading competitor sites, will cost you in lost sales.

Aside from load-time, you also have to deal with your prospect's very short attention span. In other words, you only have a few seconds to attract your visitors before they leave. As such, you must communicate and concentrate your message right down to the really important. Don't overwhelm them with so much information, fluff, or glitz that they miss your point. While your site may have entertainment value, if they do not take action you are still losing.

### **Be Professional**

They say that "you never get a second chance to make a good first impression." First impressions are therefore important to the degree to which visitors are positively impacted by the first or index page. It is where the selling process actually begins. Consistent color, well-balanced information, appealing and quick-loading graphics, and, most important, the right message targeted to the proper audience are the most important elements of a professional-looking, repeatedly revisited, and often referred Web site.

In fact, the Web site's front page message is the highest in priority. Don't let careless mistakes weaken the impact of your presentation, and always proofread -- and have others proofread -- your copy for typographical and grammatical errors. Use a language and project an image that your specific target audience can easily understand. In other words, are you trying to convey that you are informed, serious, professional, credible, fun, helpful, resourceful, or advanced technologically? The tone of your message should appeal specifically to a targeted market and help put visitors in a particular frame of mind.

A final caveat, though. The first page should not be the only one that follows the above rules. Applying most of these pointers to an entire site should be carefully considered. Needless to say, however, that if you are able to make them pass through that all-important first page hurdle, then persuading them to take action later on should be a cinch.