

Playing the Web Game Well: Five Ways to Win

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Because it is expressly designed for the rapid and widespread distribution of information, and because marketing is an information-based function, the Internet, with its World Wide Web, is potentially a very powerful marketing tool for sport organizations. However, like any tool, the Web can be used more or less effectively. What makes proper utilization of the Web as a marketing tool especially difficult is its relative novelty and complexity. This paper identifies five key issues that must be addressed by sport organizations wishing to make the most effective use of the Internet as a marketing tool. These issues are: Online Information Modalities, Client-Organization Integration, Internet Positioning, Effectiveness Evaluation, and Security. How and why each issue is important to determining Internet marketing success is explained, and strategies for addressing the issues are outlined and discussed.

Keywords: Internet marketing, sports marketing

Introduction

Over the past decade, the World Wide Web has become an increasingly expansive and sophisticated global communication medium. The Web's great virtue is that it can be utilized to convey, virtually instantaneously across thousands of miles, products and services which can be distributed electronically (Thomas 1998). These include information-heavy services such as banking, securities trading and travel reservations; electronic products such as computer software; personal and business communications; fixed and moving images; voice and music; teaching, learning and training resources; and a plethora of other types of information. Sport organizations have certainly not been left behind in this communication revolution. For example, the Web's information storage, transfer and informational interactivity capabilities have led to innovations in Web-based instruction for sport management and administration (Bennett 2002; Chappelet 2001).

The fact that the Web is specifically designed for the widespread distribution of information makes it potentially a very effective marketing medium. This is because marketing is preeminently an information-based function. In marketing, it is the message that counts, and the message is always nothing more than information couched in a certain way. As a result, the Internet and the World Wide Web provide sport organizations the ability to reach sport fans throughout the globe at a cost much less than traditional advertising (Delpy & Bosetti 1998). Indeed, the Internet has already proven to be a powerful marketing tool for many kinds of organizations, and sport industry firms are also beginning to understand how this globe-spanning medium has the potential to add substantially to their marketing clout.

Like any other tool, however, the World Wide Web can be utilized more or less well. One factor that can make its effective use as a marketing tool difficult is its relative novelty in comparison to other vehicles such as print media and television. Another is the fact that the Web is constantly evolving in its complexity, depth and potential for interactivity. Given the Web's youth and quickly evolving nature, companies and other organizations seeking to utilize it as a marketing tool may hardly know where to begin. Indeed, Brown (2003) found that in general, sport industry organizations "have a long way to go" (p.53) in taking

advantage of the Internet as a marketing medium. All marketers may understand initially that to use the Web most effectively, they will need a website. They may have little appreciation of basic issues such as what content should be on the site, what provisions for visitor interaction should be made an integral part of the site, or how to attract those visitors. The lack of such knowledge simply amounts to not knowing how to use the Web as an effective communication and marketing tool. Without that knowledge, the tool cannot be used to maximum advantage.

In this paper, we will focus on five key areas which a sport organization must address as it seeks to develop an effective Web marketing presence. These five areas are: Online Information Modalities, Client-Organization Integration, Web Positioning, Effectiveness Evaluation and Security. How and why each issue is important to determining Internet marketing success is explained and strategies to approach the issues are outlined.

Online Information Modalities

In its infancy, the World Wide Web was a medium consisting almost entirely of static text and images. In that respect, Web pages were much like pages in a magazine, though the images were often less rich and the text less sophisticated than what was found in many magazines. In those early days, Web marketing by organizations often consisted solely of developing text which, in conjunction with photographs and other images, would provide information about the organization and its services in an attractive manner. The text and images might be changed occasionally, but in some cases they were left unaltered on the website for months.

Providing attractive, informative text and static images to Web consumers is still a key aspect of virtually any Internet marketing effort. However, today's evolving Web offers new and potentially powerful information modalities to engage the visitor. In addition to text and fixed images, today's websites can be designed to include online purchasing, video, sound, and live chat. They can also be made to provide instantly updated information, with visitors being able to access up-to-the-minute scores of games in progress or current weather conditions at a particular sport venue.

This increased capability of website pages raises a key question which sport organizations must address as they develop their Web marketing strategy: what information modalities should be included on the website? Perhaps, given what the organization intends to accomplish with the site, text and static images are sufficient. However, in many cases marketing objectives will be more effectively achieved by including online purchasing capabilities, video, sound, and/or live chat in the site's design.

In a study of the use of the Internet by sport clubs, Beech, Chadwick and Tapp (2000) found that there was a wide discrepancy in the use of information modalities in the marketing efforts of Premier League football clubs in England. Some clubs, the researchers found, were taking little or no advantage of modalities such as video clips or radio broadcasts to provide visitors with a multi-sensory experience. They argued that these clubs, by neglecting to take full advantage of the possible website resources, were missing an opportunity to create a competitive advantage vis-à-vis other clubs.

Certainly, this is likely to be true of professional sport clubs. However, there are many kinds of sport organization, ranging from fitness centres to equipment manufacturers to

multinational sport alliances; and for these other types of organizations, it cannot be said definitively that they should use any specific information modality beyond basic text and graphics. Given that there is no general rule here, how does a sport organization decide what information modalities should be included in its Web site?

To make this decision about any such specific technology as video or chat, site developers must first become clear on two things. The first is how the website will be integrated into the organization's other marketing efforts. What the organization should be aiming for overall is a cohesive cyberspace strategy (Watson, Berton, Pitt, & Zinkhan 1999). To achieve this, Web-based efforts must complement and strengthen the organization's other marketing activities. Thinking of its Web-based efforts as one important aspect within a larger marketing context can help the organization get clarify a second central issue, which is the specific purpose(s) that the Web site is intended to fulfil (Reedy & Schullo 2004).

Once the site's purpose—how it is to fit into the marketing mix—is determined, this understanding can be refined into a set of specific objectives to be achieved through the website, including both short- and long-term objectives. Once these are established, developers can begin answering the question of how and to what degree various possible modalities might fulfil the overall purpose and specific objectives. For example, if the main objective is to market a sport-related product or service, website developers should ask whether the technology will make the product or service more visible, increase product awareness, or increase demand (Gillentine 2003). Similar questions can be asked if the “product” to be marketed is simply the organization itself: to what degree will implementation of a particular technology on the site help increase visibility and awareness of the organization?

General questions about purposes and objectives can be supplemented with more specific questions. Johnson (2001) notes that in developing a sport information database, it is important to ask who will be the users of the database, what will they expect in the way of information, and how that information should be structured. Similar questions can be asked in determining information modalities of a sport-focused website. These are user-focused questions which recognize that in the end, the website's marketing purposes and objectives cannot be achieved without providing the site's visitors with what they wish to obtain by visiting the site, whether that is information, products, services, an opportunity to feel part of a team or organization, or something else. Questions in this area include:

1. Who will the users be? What categories can they be expected to fall into (e.g., casual surfers, subscribers seeking updated information or potential buyers of products or services offered).
2. What will the users in various categories expect and want to obtain from the website in the way of information, services, or intangibles such as the sense of feeling closer to a team?
3. And finally—the key question for determining information modalities—how can what the user wants and expects most effectively be presented on the site?

To answer this third question, each available way of presenting information to the site's users must be considered in light of its effectiveness in fulfilling users' desires and expectations.

Figure 1 presents a diagram showing these key decision points for determining the website's information modalities.

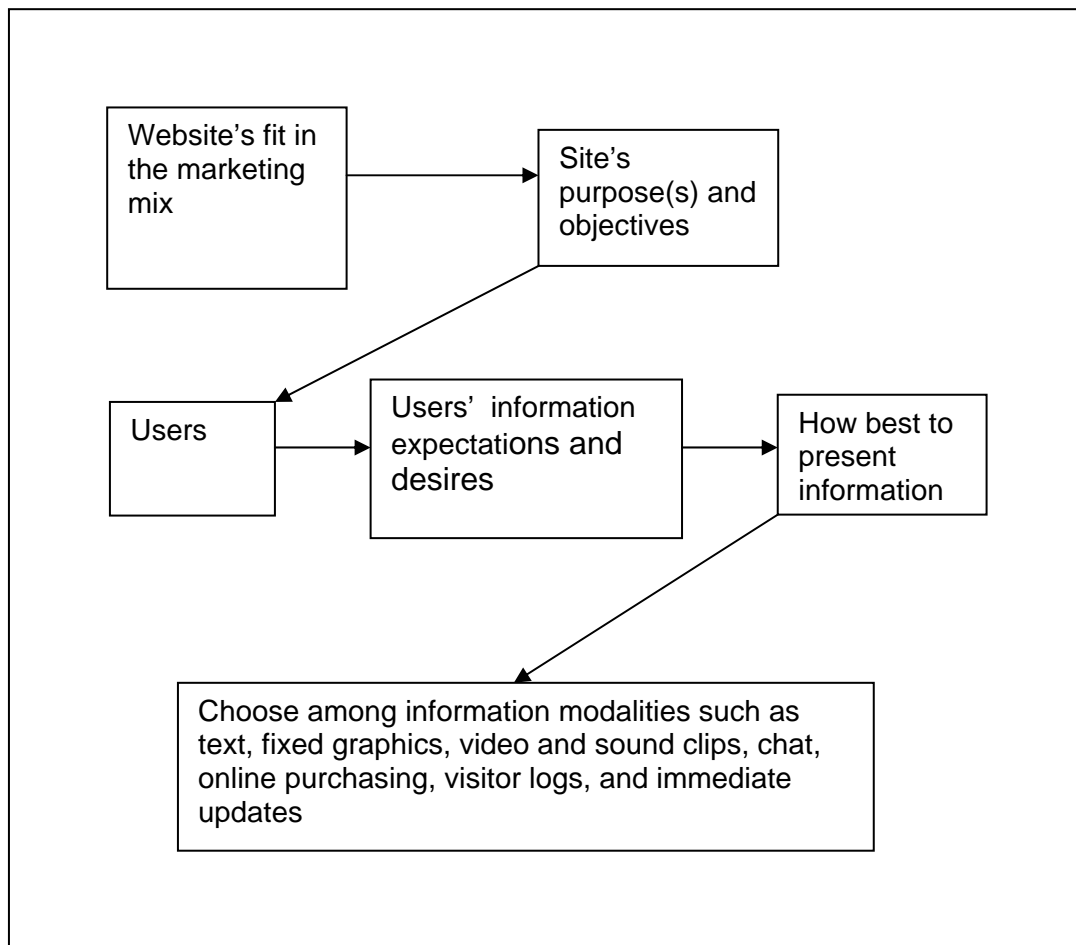


Figure 1. Key decision points for determining information modalities.

Client-Organization Integration

Whether a sport organization is a professional team or a water park, a sport facility or a bicycling club, client-organization integration should be a central and continuing objective of the organization. Client-organization integration is the psychological and emotional joining of individuals who are interested in the organization and its functions to the organization itself. When referring to websites, the “client” is the site visitor. Thus, focusing on client-organization integration in this case amounts to constructing a website that stimulates visitors to have positive feelings toward the organization and feel closer to it.

Client-organization integration is an aspect of Web marketing which clearly overlaps the topic just discussed—information modalities. As Beech et al. (2000) suggest, presenting information in various ways can help a visitor to a team site feel more involved with the team. The same can often be said for other kinds of sport-related website. The judicious use not only of text and fixed graphics but of ways of presenting information which make the visitor feel like more than a passive reader can generate positive interest in and appreciation of the organization. This is because choice and interactivity help foster client-organization

integration. Providing visitors with a number of options beyond reading text, such as playing various video or sound clips, leaving a message on a Web log, or voting on some sport-related issue, can create a virtual atmosphere in which visitors no longer feel like an anonymous observers with little real connection to the organization. Instead, by making choices and interacting with the site, the visitor tends to experience himself or herself as someone who is interacting with the organization the site represents.

Interactivity is something that sports fans may be especially seeking when they visit a professional team's website. Though the fans cannot go out onto the field with "their" team, they want to feel part of the team in whatever legitimate way they can. A well constructed team website can go far toward encouraging this identification and integration of the visitor with the team. An illustration of how a website can generate a sense of family was recently provided by the American New England Patriots football team, when a young defensive lineman on the team was tragically killed. Soon after, on the front page of the team's website, <http://patriots.com>, homage was paid to the lineman, including a video clip which visitors could choose to play and information for visitors who wished to make a donation in the player's name. By providing these options, the team enabled interested fans to take a part in the team mourning process. Other Patriot site features which promoted interactivity and visitor integration included copious information about the past, present and future of the team, its cheerleaders, its schedules and its roster; a media center with video clips and audio interviews; an online shop; and pages on which visitors could vote for "best plays" of various sorts. All of these functions helped to create a virtual reality in which visitors could feel more closely connected to the team.

Research suggests that the creation of strongly engaging online environments leads to positive consequences for commercial websites (Novak, Hoffman, & Yung 2000). Not only can the establishment online communities be a strong asset for organizational websites, but organizations in the sport industry are often well-suited for developing such communities (Evans & Smith 2004). Creating an online reality which provides visitors with ways to identify with the organization can be a powerful marketing technique whether the site is for a sports team, a sports news organization, or a fitness centre. Because of its capabilities for interactivity and multiple media, a well designed sport-related website can go far beyond what can be done in this respect with a magazine or a brochure. Since sport aficionados are typically hungry for information about their favorite sports and teams, even providing copious and often updated information helps create a positive regard for the organization and can help foster a sense of being part of that sport "family" or community. The payoff for this may vary, depending on the type of organization and the website purpose. It may include increased ticket sales, increased sales of products online or offline, or simply awareness of, interest in and positive feelings toward the organization. In each case, however, the well planned creation of a website which helps the client integrate with the organization can constitute very effective marketing.

Web Positioning

There is a well known line from a movie (*Field of Dreams*) about baseball: "Build it and they will come." The line may be true of an imaginary stadium in a corn field, and it may also be true of some team websites, many of whose constituents will tend to find the site by themselves. However, for many sports-related sites, building the site is not enough. Additional effort is needed, and without that effort one of the great assets of the Web may go untapped. This asset is the fact that the Web provides a more level marketing playing field for

organizations, allowing smaller firms and groups to better compete with larger ones (Berthon, Pitt, & Watson 1996; Laflin 2001; Paul 1996). To best exploit that asset, developers cannot consider their job completed once they have created the website. Rather, they must work to position the site as prominently as possible among the millions of other websites that seriously compete for the attention of visitors with limited time available to explore sites. If effective ways are not found to draw in those individuals who are the organization's natural constituents, the website's messages, products or services may languish virtually unknown.

Thus, Web positioning, which is the marketing of the website itself, is crucial to the success of sport-related sites. Here, we consider two basic strategies a sport organization may utilize to make potential visitors aware of the existence of its site and to make it easy for them to arrive there. The first of these strategies is to seek a high ranking on major search engines, such as Google™ and Web directories such as Yahoo™. Search engines rank websites according to the key words that a potential visitor inserts into a search box. The Web positioning goal should be to obtain as high a ranking as possible in major search engines, under the common words people use to search for the kinds of sport-related sites they are interested in. Thus, a fitness club in London might seek to gain a high ranking on search engines under key terms such as "fitness," "fitness club" "exercise," "strength," and "London." Creating pages that rank highly under specific key word(s) is a delicate art that involves issues such as what actual words are on the page, different search engines' criteria for gaining a high listing and how many hyperlinks to the website there are from other websites. Indeed, the process is so complicated and important that it may be necessary for an organization to designate one or more individuals to develop sophisticated search engine placement strategies and techniques.

A second basic Web positioning strategy is to advertise the website's presence, address, and benefits in as many appropriate places and ways as possible (Berthon et al. 1996). Word of mouth is one potentially effective way of letting people know about the website's existence and address. For example, this can be done at meetings with customers, clients, vendors and other stakeholders. In addition, there can be a concerted effort to distribute the website's address in written and electronic communications. These may include:

- Text material distributed by the organization, including letters, business cards, invoices, bills, posters, and so on;
- E-mail communications; and
- Marketing materials, written and visual.

Both aspects of the organization's Web positioning strategy should be implemented continuously. Criteria for search engine placement optimization change fairly often, and a website which was ranked, under a key term, on the first page of a major search engine one month may find itself relegated to page ten the next month. If search engine rankings fall, the reasons for this should be sought and appropriate actions taken. Advertising the website in other venues should also be a continuous activity.

In sum, a sport organization should never take it for granted that once a website is online, people will somehow find their way to it without making an effort to show them the way. Accordingly, the organization should continually work to gain and maintain high search engine placement through appropriate key terms and seek every opportunity to promulgate the fact that it has a website and the site's address.

Effectiveness Evaluation

Once the website's purpose has been determined, information modalities have been selected, the site has been constructed and placed online, and a continuing Web positioning plan devised and enacted, then another key question arises: how effectively is the website fulfilling the purpose it was designed for. Effectiveness evaluation requires again focusing on the purposes and objectives of the website and determining (a) benchmarks which will indicate the satisfactory fulfillment of objectives, and (b) ways of measuring how closely results approach the benchmarks.

An ongoing site evaluation plan helps to identify successful and unsuccessful marketing strategies and provides information necessary for site improvement. Peer, developer and consumer evaluation should all be part of the evaluation mix (Gillentine 2003). Visitors' opinions of and interactions with the website are among the most important things to measure in evaluating the site. One of the unique features of the Web is that its capacity to keep track of visitor usage, with statistics on the number of visitors daily, weekly and monthly, being typically available for websites (Cracknell 2001; Paul 1996). These include statistics on the specific Web pages viewed most often, which can provide invaluable information about what content most engages visitors. If, over time, the number of visitors is found to be rising at a reasonable rate, this is an indication that the website positioning plan is working; if it is declining, this would suggest that the Web positioning plan may need to be revised. Depending on the website, other indicators of how well the site is fulfilling its objectives may include product and/or ticket sales and comments in visitor logs and emails.

One major rationale for establishing an ongoing evaluation program is that only by doing so can the organization know whether money being expended on the website is being well spent. Creating and maintaining a site can incur a substantial financial and energy investment, especially if it involves information modalities beyond text and fixed graphics. Without establishing clear objectives and an ongoing evaluation program to measure how well the objectives are being met, no cost-benefit analysis can be done. In making such an analysis, however, it is important to remember that after the initial investment in the website, costs for maintaining and updating the site may decrease substantially (Mullaney & Hof 2002). Costs per marketing impact, whether that be a sale, a new customer or simply generating a positive attitude toward the organization, may therefore decrease over time.

Security

Security is one of the most important aspects of any commercial website (Watson, Berthon, Pitt, & Zinkhan 1999). This is also true of sport-related websites, and especially so if financial transactions take place on the site. Among European Internet users, the most important criterion for a successful online shopping experience was found to be security (AIM 2002). Credit card and other financial information pertaining to visitors must be steadfastly safeguarded with up-to-date security technology. Even if no financial transactions take place, any information whatsoever which is gathered and stored about site visitors must be diligently protected. A single incursion into the website by hackers could result in the compromise of data pertaining to hundreds or even thousands of visitors depending on the popularity of the site. The resulting notoriety and loss of trust could have seriously detrimental effects on the organization's Web efforts.

What is sometimes forgotten in discussions of website security is that the protection of visitor data involves more than blocking unauthorized access which might take place online. Tight security protocols should also be instituted in the workplace itself, so that visitor information cannot be transferred without necessity to places other than where it is normally securely stored. This can help prevent, for instance, a worker transferring client information to a laptop computer, which is then taken to a non-secure location with the intention of analyzing the data. In such a situation, a theft might result in the client information being stolen. This very scenario occurred on a large scale in 2006, when a U.S. Veterans Administration analyst took home a computer which included the social security identifying numbers of 26.5 million individuals and the computer was stolen from the analyst's home (Sullivan 2006). This breach in security, which put millions of individuals at risk of identity theft, clearly illustrates the absolute necessity of including secure workplace data handling as a central element of any website security program.

Figure 2 summarizes the five key website development issues that have been discussed above, along with the suggested strategies for addressing each issue.

1. Choose website information modalities
 - Determine how the website fits into the organization's marketing mix
 - Determine specific website purpose(s) and objectives
 - Determine the website's users, along with their desires and expectations
 - Choose appropriate information modalities to meet user desires/expectations
2. Seek client-organization integration
 - Provide the website visitor with choices including if possible, interactive modalities so that the visitor experiences being more than a passive observer
 - Overall, seek to create an online atmosphere which helps instill positive feelings toward the organization and a sense of community
3. Take Web positioning very seriously (market the website)
 - Develop and maintain an effective search engine optimization strategy
 - Put in place a continuing program of advertising the existence of the website and its address in company communications and other appropriate vehicles
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of the Web marketing program
 - Determine benchmarks for successful fulfillment of objectives
 - Decide on appropriate measurements
 - Pay close attention to indicators of website visitor interest and satisfaction
 - Revise the website strategy as needed in light of effectiveness evaluation
5. Make security a high priority
 - Use up-to-date technology and methods to prevent unauthorized online access to visitor data or sensitive organizational information
 - Establish effective workplace security protocols to prevent the mishandling of visitor information by employees

Figure 2. Summary of Key Issues and Strategies.

Conclusion

The five issues outlined above (see Figure 2) are certainly among the most vital for sports-focused organizations to address in their website development plans. It is difficult to say which aspect is the most important. Security is certainly of very high priority, but choosing information modalities and seeking client-organization integration are both crucial to the marketing function of the website, Web positioning is critical to gaining visitors, and an ongoing evaluation plan is absolutely necessary to ensuring that the website performs its marketing functions optimally. Sport organizations will go a long way toward creating and implementing a successful Web marketing effort by paying close attention to these five key issues. By addressing them effectively, they will be well on their way to taking their proper place on what may eventually become the world's most powerful marketing medium, the World Wide Web.

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