First Things First

Yes – we want our web site to meet our business objectives. But those objectives and the approach to meeting them must be based in reality if we expect success. Too many sites appear to be based on desires and assumptions rather than pragmatic analysis of the situation. To understand which business objectives are realistic for a web site it is important first to know who comes to the site and how they get there.

This is not to say that we should never set web site objectives for visitors who do not currently come to the site. However, we must recognize that going after new visitors requires more effort, resources, and risk than servicing those who already come. This also does not mean that we should service visitors that do not fit our business objectives just because they show up. But what does make sense is to first service the "low-hanging fruit," those visitors who do match our business objectives and already come to our site.

When focusing on who comes to the web site many of us skip several important steps in our hurry to meet our objectives. It is easy to forget that our web site often is not the first contact or the ultimate step in the process with this visitor. For many visitors it provides one or more intermediate steps important in moving the relationship forward. Therefore, for every type of visitor we also need to determine the context of the visit.

Context is important. For example, when a sales rep leaves a prospect with a brochure and other collateral it is in the context of the conversation that preceded it. The function is to reinforce the conversation and provide memory aids after the rep has left. If the prospect now comes to our web site she already remembers us and is opening the door for us to provide deeper education and move her toward a commitment. If she is met with a rehash of the same collateral she already has, the relationship stalls and an opportunity is lost.

Structured exercises can help us avoid missing important steps in complex processes. One of the exercises used in our Web Site Business Alignment Workshop captures the answers to three questions for each type of visitor that comes to the site:

1. Who comes to our web site?
2. How did they get there?
3. What do they already know?

The first identifies the type of visitor. The second and third help us identify and understand the context of the visitor.

The answers to these questions form a base for everything that follows. For one thing, they are testable. In other words, there are fairly simple ways to get objective data to answer these three questions. For another, the answers set the stage for the follow-on questions about likely expectations and realistic next steps in the relationship building process. Finally, these three questions can be applied anywhere in the product experience life cycle, from pre-purchase education to post-purchase support.

Once the low-hanging fruit have been addressed, the same three questions can be modified slightly to help define requirements for visitor types who don't come now but we would like to attract. In this case, the second question becomes: "How *will* they get there?" It becomes the awareness and acquisition question that must be answered to make the new objective realistic.

As a final note, these same three questions also provide important insights as customer and prospect interaction moves across channels. Once the initial awareness is achieved, the answer to the, "how they got there," question generally points to another of our own channels. We also can easily extend this structured exercise to the other channels by asking: who comes to our "phone support," how did they get there, and what do they already know? The answers to these questions across all channels begin to weave a larger picture of all the interactions and how they interrelate to create a seamless (or fractured) overall business experience for our customers and prospects.