

Passing the Buck On Web Sites

For most companies, web sites have quietly evolved into the integrator of all their communication channels.

When the sales reps call on prospects, where do they tell them to go for more information? Where do the physical brochures and fact sheets they leave behind direct the prospect for additional detail – or for that matter the media advertisements, the product packaging, and the telephone “hold” messages? Conversely, where do many customers go on their own to find information on how to communicate with the company: phone numbers, email addresses, physical locations, hours, support, etc.?

After all that effort to get them to your web site, what do customers find when they get there?

For too many companies the answer is a “collection of stuff” that marginally meets the needs or expectations of the customer and does not capitalize on the tremendous business opportunity to educate and move the relationship forward. Why do companies let this happen?

There is no one responsible for the business success of the company who also is responsible for the business strategy of the web site!

Nowhere is this more apparent than when companies attempt to address aligning web sites with business objectives. We generally find one or more of the following three barriers:

Technical Abdication: as soon as the words “web site” are mentioned everyone points to the IT department. The problem is, that even when the people in IT put in their best effort, they are not directly accountable for the overall business success of the functions they support. Their effort remains secondary to the business function owner’s overall objectives and responsibility. Additionally, developing a web site that capitalizes on cross-channel integration requires the consensus of a diverse set of business stakeholders. Facilitating business strategy consensus is generally not a strong suit of IT, and one IT often avoids, knowing that if not properly handled it will create more work for the already strained technical resources.

Corporate Marketing Tunnel Vision: too often corporate marketing views the web site primarily in terms of advertising & image. While corporate marketing clearly is an important stakeholder that could take on responsibility for the success of the web site as the channel integrator for the overall business, they rarely expand their vision broadly enough to succeed. To be successful they must treat customer support, product and service managers, investor relations and other relevant parts of the business as equal players in setting the business objectives, priorities and metrics for the web sit

Ad Hoc Committee Stalemate: often happens in conjunction with one of the previous two situations. Each stakeholder group is responsible for the functionality and funding of their portion of the web site. If IT or Marketing does “own” the web site, they often negotiate functionality and priorities individually with each group. One problem facing each group’s constituency is finding what they seek, generally by navigating from the home page through the site. Therefore every group wants their “stuff” on the home page. The process of negotiation among the groups, whether individually or together, generally leads to a compromise web site that offers many customers a marginal experience and does not optimize the site to meet the overall company objectives. This happens because there is no process for managing the discussion within this larger context, then reaching consensus on solutions that meet the company’s multiple objectives.

Companies need to understand that the web site, customer experience, and cross-channel integration are interrelated and require a total company perspective that transcends the traditional company divisions. Someone accountable for the overall business needs to also be accountable for and champion this integration on the web site and in the company. For most companies this level of awareness and commitment to overall business alignment has yet to happen. Those that get there first will not only get a better return from their web site investment – they will get a competitive advantage for their business by consciously using their web site to improve what it already does, integrate their efforts across all their channels to better serve their customers.

iorg.com workshops, audits, and consulting teach your non-technical business managers how to develop web site strategy and objectives that support your business, translate those objectives into auditable design requirements, and effectively communicate those requirements to designers and developers.

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