



BEYOND YOUR WEBSITE

A Helpful Guide

Written by Amy Lenzo, under Creative Commons licensing

Once you have established an online presence with your website, you want people to know you're there and to keep coming back. The best way to do this is create ongoing communications that will surprise and delight your audience, and/or promote interactive exchange.

Regular Communications

Regular communications are the key to keeping your name fresh in your audience's mind, and at the top of search engine results.

A newsletter or other regular mailing:

- ❖ Reminds your audience that you are still in business and lets you share what you are currently doing in an immediate ongoing way
- ❖ By reaching out and making a regular personal connection with your community, your vision and initiatives become recognizable and known
- ❖ Regular communications build community by involving your audience in a personal interaction
- ❖ They offer opportunities to expand your audience with 'subscribe' buttons on your site & 'forward this communication to a friend' options

- ❖ Carefully chosen links drive traffic to your site and/or blog, improve your search engine results, and create a highly effective 'circulation' between these important elements of your online presence
- ❖ Tracking recipient responses to your links can give you important information about what subjects or activities your community is most interested in



So, it's clear that some kind of regular communication is essential, but there are many options - newsletter, e-zine, announcements, inspirational mailings, etc. - and your particular choices for format and mailing frequency will be as individual as you are. Your online communications designer can help you decide the best methods for your purposes.

Even if you don't yet know what kinds of electronic communications you might want to create to keep in touch with your clientele and serve their needs, you will want to start with a simple way for people to join your 'mailing list', as I suggested earlier.

I suggest that your designer uses a professional mailing list program for this purpose; the one I use has exceptional tracking abilities to help you know who is responding to what so you can fine-tune your marketing strategies and direct them to the most receptive segments of your audience. The format is html and customizable, so you can be as eloquent and creative as you wish visually, and a special feature allows your readers to forward to others without altering the structural integrity of your original communication.



Blogs

A blog offers a whole new level of contact with your audience. Blogs offer the creative scope of a website and the immediacy of a newsletter with the added bonus of interactive capacity. Perhaps most importantly, frequent blog updates give you direct access to blog search engines, which can greatly influence your overall search results.

You can integrate a blog into your existing suite of online communication tools with a consistent 'look and feel', or it can stand alone as an alternative to a website and/or newsletter. You will find that much of the information in the companion guide on conceiving your website will be applicable and helpful to

you in conceiving your blog, but there is other information, specific to blogging, that will help you be most successful and effective in this medium. I will share some of that information here, and your online communications designer will be able to answer questions and set you up with the best design format for your unique needs.

You can use your blog in a number of ways and the advantages of having one are many:

- ❖ Blogs can be a great opportunity for creative expression, and they are extremely versatile. Your blog can offer a way to make your ideas better known and enhance your reputation as an expert in your field, or it can be written anonymously and offer you the privacy to explore your thoughts and ideas before exposing your identity to the public.
- ❖ One of the great advantages of the blog format for those who want to use it to convey their ideas directly is how personal it is, and how accessible it makes you as the author. Your authentic voice is not only the best way to express your own personal vision, but it can be the catalyst for others to share their own truth.

- ❖ Blogs offer a way for your audience to play with you. Through the optional 'comments' function, you can invite specific or general feedback and/or interaction. If it is your intent, there are ways to support high levels of blog interaction, similar to the components that nurture and midwife other online conversations but tailored specifically for this medium.
- ❖ Blogs have a built-in (but optional) capacity for promoting your work to a wider audience through automatic postings to international blog directories and the increasingly large alternative and mainstream network that is building around this phenomenon.
- ❖ Regular updates and the ability to tag individual posts makes your blog a kind of search-engine-loving machine on steroids. There is no faster way to raise your online visibility.
- ❖ Blogs open up new possibilities for creativity using multi-media - you can seamlessly include audio files, images, Flash & video, as well as links to sites and email addresses... whatever you can put on any other web page and more.
- ❖ Blogs are flexible mediums - you can easily set them up with multiple 'authors', or create password-protected spaces for special initiatives or projects.
- ❖ The recent popularity of blogs has opened the way for many innovative 'widgets' or specially written pieces of code that allow you to include all sorts of creative options in your blog, like mapping where your readers are coming from, linking to a rotating source of your photographic archives, creating polls, allowing people to email your posts to 3rd parties, etc.

Forums, Online Discussion Formats, and Online Community

Even a casual reading of the business section of your local newspaper illustrates how important social networking has become in the current economy.

The world-wide fascination with online social interaction reflects real needs within and across cultures and tells us something about

the nature of this new medium and the specific value it can offer. Whatever your purpose, with conscious attention and a clear intention, an online discussion forum can be a very effective way to bring your audience together and help to create & foster community feeling.

Online discussions can happen independently as interactions around specific topics, as a supportive element in a larger complex of online activities, or form the basis of a whole product offering. They can be as simple as a list serve, or as complex as a fully-integrated and customizable suite of community software as seen on popular social networking sites like Zeadz or MySpace.

Your purpose for integrating an online discussion forum into your online strategy may be as straightforward as a way to share best practices or advice on using your product or service, or it can be as subtle and fine-tuned as the wish to call forth and distill the collective wisdom of any given group. In any case, you will want to be clear about the investments in time and/or money that will be necessary to realize your intentions, and make your community thrive and grow.

As you can see, there are many things to consider when deciding whether an online community forum is right for you, and if so, what format would work best. This is a conversation you'll want to have with your online communications designer, who is a specialist in this field.

Wikis

One of the more exciting new interactive technologies, wikis are collaborative authoring environments, or web pages that can easily be modified, added to or edited by a group of people.

Each entry in a wiki is like a multi-part webpage that showcases the finished material, offers a place to edit and make changes to it, a way to comment on what has been written, and the ability to subscribe to receive notice of any new changes via email.



Wikis make particularly effective tools for a focused exploration or work on a collective project - e.g. clarifying the elements that define a particular concept, writing the 'whole' history of a movement, creating a collective poem or any other piece of collaborative writing.

Wikipedia.org is a great example of collaborative authoring - With thousands of participants around the world creating pages on

millions of subjects, in 10 languages, it is truly an exercise in collective ingenuity.

Online Learning: Training, Workshops & Seminars

The online environment is an effective and cost-efficient way to conduct trainings or deliver 'in-person' content to an audience that would otherwise be unable to attend because of cost or distance limitations. Online trainings, interesting interviews, or moderated discussions can be offered free of cost, as a way to promote your message or services and support your community.

The format can be simple or complex, delivered in either asynchronistic or synchronistic models, and utilize a wide range of communication tools like telephone conference calls, VOIP (voice over internet protocol) services like Skype, 'chat' tools, video or slide show presentations, static website pages, online conference or specialized presentation software, etc.

- ❖ Tele-Seminars can be a single session or a series of sessions focused on a specific topic or theme & conducted via a telephone bridge line
- ❖ Online Conferences are a bit more ambitious undertakings utilizing sophisticated technology but they offer a uniquely stimulating and innovative experience

- ❖ Whatever format you are using, your participants' experience can be enhanced by bringing in a visual component to help focus the conversation, illustrate the material you are presenting, or otherwise facilitate your purpose.
- ❖ Note: Online conversations and/or blogs can be very effective used in the period leading up to and/or following a tele-session or conference.

As you can see, there are a lot of possibilities here, and these are just a few to whet your imagination. Talk with your online communications designer to discover which options will be most effective for your needs and offer the most value within your budget.

Amy Lenzo
Clear Light Communications
www.clearlightcommunications.com