

The Role of Small-Business Web Sites in Supporting Business-Client Communication

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SMALL BUSINESS WEB SITES

Whereas a growing body of research is examining the Web sites of large businesses, especially large e-commerce businesses such as eBay, researchers have tended to overlook the sites of more traditional small businesses. Yet a 2001 survey by the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) found that 58% of American small businesses with only 1-9 employees nevertheless maintained a Web site. The most widespread benefit of such sites is the contact they bring in from additional customers and different types of customers (NFIB, 2001), a finding echoed by Pflugheoft et al. for slightly larger small businesses (2003, p.493). Only a quarter (25%) of these small businesses actually produced revenue through sales directly on their site. By contrast, about half produced revenue through “sales stimulated by the site, but made over the telephone, fax, or e-mail” (50%) or “sales stimulated by the site, but made in their place of business” (57%).

Such low-key but nevertheless viable Web presences raise the general question that my presentation addresses: What role are small business Web sites playing in supporting the communication necessary to conduct transactions between small businesses and their clients?

TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION COMPANIES, CONSULTANTS, AND INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS

To address this question, I focus on one type of small business service at the nexus of contemporary information and communication technologies: technical communicators. Because of the project-based nature of technical communication work, many technical communicators work not as regular employees but as proprietors of small tech comm. companies, consultants, and independent contractors (STC 2004). Not surprisingly, technical communicators' primary means for obtaining new clients are through referrals and networking (STC 2004), means in which off-Web communication is vital. Indeed, a 2003 Society for Technical Communication (STC) survey of American and Canadian independent contractors and temp agency employees asked about their marketing methods but did not even include Web sites among the

eight marketing response options, not a promising sign. Moreover, because technical communicators provide a service and not a product, their small-business sites would not lend themselves to the kind of quick anonymous transactions typical of large, successful e-commerce sites. Rather, technical communicators' sites, if effective, would have to somehow complement the off-Web communication necessary seal a contract with a client.

Despite these challenges, a 2005 survey of members of a professional organization of technical communication consultants and independent contractors found that publishing a Web site was among the more valuable marketing methods, ranking behind referrals and networking but nevertheless rated as "very valuable" or "extremely valuable" by a slight majority of respondents (STC Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG, 2005a, p.7). Only 22% of respondents to that question indicated that it was not applicable, suggesting that more than three-quarters of technical communication consultants and independent contractors have indeed gone through the trouble of publishing a Web site for their business (STC Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG, 2005b, p.10).

METHODS

To systematically explore the communicative role of such Web sites, I collected, through various methods, an international sample of English-language sites of about 1000 companies, consultants, and independent contractors that offer technical communication services. I examined the sites to gather the e-mail contact and the names of proprietors or other key people who would constitute my eventual sample pool. Because some sites were obviously abandoned (a couple not updated since 1995!), I culled the sample to focus just on those sites that showed evidence of recent activity:

- updated in the previous 8 months or so in the case of the numerous U.S.-based businesses,
- and updated in the previous 16 months or so in the case of the less numerous international businesses (i.e., based outside the U.S.).

A Web-based survey was pilot tested twice. The mostly close-ended questions inquired into . . .

- methods that promote the Web sites;
- usefulness of the sites and their various features.

Then solicitations, along with two rounds of follow-ups for non-respondents, were e-mailed . . .

- first to about 360 U.S.-based tech comm. companies, consultants, and independent contractors,
- and then, after the U.S.-based survey was almost completed, to about 250 international technical communicators.

For the international survey, a few further changes were made to the survey questions.

Overall response rates, after accounting for undeliverable e-mails and responses that could not be matched with the sample pool, were approximately 40%:

- 150 respondents to the U.S. survey
- and 90 respondents to the international survey, comprising . . .
 - 34 from Canada
 - 23 from the U.K.
 - 9 from Australia
 - 1 - 4 each from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, India, Israel, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates.

After completing the survey questionnaire, a bit over half of the respondents were briefly interviewed by e-mail, and were asked open-ended questions that arose from their survey responses and from features of their sites. Survey respondents' sites were then downloaded so as to provide a stable corpus for content analysis.

RESULTS

I have only begun to analyze the results. So what I'll present here today are the quantitative responses for the three most pertinent survey questions, as well as some commentary synthesizing some of the main themes emerging from both the quantitative and qualitative data.

First, let's consider a question that we might most expect to ask not necessarily of a service-oriented business but of a typical e-commerce product-oriented site:

1. What percentage of your technical communication clientele has originated *primarily* because of your business Web site?

	U.S. %	INTERNATIONAL %
0 %	23	16
1 – 4 %	26	12
5 – 9 %	11	12
10 – 19 %	19	18
20 – 49 %	17	28
50 – 100 %		9
Don't know	4	6

These results show that, as expected, business prospects generated primarily through Web sites represent only a small portion of total business prospects, with about half the respondents getting less than 10% of their clientele primarily through their Web sites. This roughly corresponds with the findings of that 2001 National Federation of Independent Business survey I mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, accepting the well-acknowledged marketing preeminence of referrals and networking over Web sites even as I was preparing this study of business Web sites, I was pleasantly surprised by the proportion reporting that their sites were a primary source for 20% or more of their clientele. Indeed, after the modest showing that small-business Web sites received in the previously-mentioned studies and in my first pilot test, I actually shifted the response options downward for the American survey (with the broad 20% - 100% range represented by just one response option, as shown in the table above), only to subsequently shift them upward for the international survey. Some of those responding in the 20%-plus categories appear to advertise heavily on other Web sites, such as on search engines, or to concentrate their businesses in niches such as editing, where communication services are arguably more quantifiable and commoditized (e.g., editing services priced per word) and hence more easily sold over the Web.

The next question complements the first in that it looks at clientele who are not included in the first question:

2. For technical communication clientele who have not originated primarily because of your Web site (but primarily because of referrals, reputation, networking, etc.), how much has your Web site helped you get such clientele?

	U.S. %	INTERNATIONAL %
0 - Not at all	7	8
1 - A little	24	39
2 - Moderately	33	30
3 - A lot	28	20
? - Don't know	7	0
Average (0 - 3)	1.88	1.64

Unlike e-commerce sites selling products, small-business Web sites promoting services are not necessarily intended to operate in isolation but rather to complement business-client communication transacted through off-Web channels. As can be seen in these results, many tech comm. companies, consultants, and independent contractors may be using their sites primarily to back up their other communication with prospective clients. Almost all report that their sites help them in this way at least a little, and about half report that their sites help them moderately to a lot. So, for technical communication services, a business Web site may more commonly be conceived of as a complementary marketing method rather than a primary marketing method.

Finally, let's look at what kind of communication precedes the Web communication, the communication that gets people to the Web site in the first place:

3. How much have the following promotional methods helped in leading people to your business Web site?

The response scale ranged from 0 ("not at all") to 3 ("a lot").

	U.S.			INTERNATIONAL		
	Average (0 - 3)	Don't know %	N/A %	Average (0 - 3)	Don't know %	N/A %
WEB: Search engines	1.90	7	1	2.01	11	3
WEB: Links from other Web sites, not including search engines	1.31	9	6	1.64	9	14
INTERNET: Web address included with your Internet-based communication (examples: e-mail and attachments, listserv postings, submissions to job boards)	1.87	5	1	1.74	12	3
PRINT: Web address imprinted on your public promotional materials (examples: business card, brochure, advertisements)	1.53	5	4	1.54	14	9
PRINT: Web address included in your private print correspondence (examples: prospecting letters, resume, tenders)	1.37	7	5	1.26	13	9
PRINT: Web address in print documents of other organizations (examples: business directories, associates' or clients' documents, professional journals, newsletters)	0.96	10	11	0.84	20	23
SPEECH: Web site mentioned in your speech communication (examples: phone and face-to-face networking, professional presentations)	1.29	5	5	1.28	10	13
REFERRALS: Web site mentioned by people outside your business	1.46	14	2	1.30	21	8

As discussed earlier, the main promotional methods for attracting new technical communication clients are generally understood to be referrals and networking. These correspond most closely to the last two promotional methods listed above (Referrals and Speech), which, interestingly, appear to play a relatively modest role in leading people to business Web sites. By contrast, the main promotional methods for leading people to business Web sites appear to operate through the Web itself and the Internet. I have not yet run statistical tests of the numbers, so I can report only what appear to be general trends. Some of these differences among promotional methods may indicate mutually exclusive practices, in which different communication channels don't mix all that well. For instance, perhaps more "personal" communication channels (such as Referrals and Speech), or all three Print communication channels for that matter, are not the best venues for leading to a digital communication channel like a Web site. Perhaps what best for leading to a digital communication channel like a Web site is other digital communication channels on the Web and Internet. On the other hand, some of these differences among promotional methods may indicate complementary practices (e.g., after a prospect has been referred or "networked," the Web site is mentioned not immediately but only in a follow-up e-mail).

CREDIBILITY

Now, from this point, the quantitative data relating to business Web sites' general communicative functions runs down to a trickle and I will be sifting through the qualitative data, data

- from the one opened-ended survey question,
- from the follow-up e-mail interviews,
- and from my analysis of the Web sites themselves.

I'd like to present one of the prominent and pertinent themes that is emerging from some of this qualitative data: credibility.

My respondents perceive that their Web sites are serving to build credibility for their small businesses in ways that perhaps complement what other means of communication are doing, in a number of ways:

- Not surprisingly, respondents frequently explained the presence of certain Web site features or their Web site as a whole by pointing to the credibility that such features generate. For instance, respondents

wrote:

“My web site is primarily a vehicle to show a portfolio of work that I have performed for clients. As such, it provides me with tremendous credibility when I reach out to new prospects. By featuring the names of clients that I know other web site visitors will recognize, along with the work I have done for them, prospects are able to get overcome a significant barrier to doing business with me: the fact that I am otherwise unknown to them. *I think my web site is able to achieve this better than I could ever convey through alternative communication channels* [emphasis mine].”

- However, more surprisingly and unlike e-commerce businesses, some technical communication businesses were not using their site as a direct source of revenue but as a means of building credibility with prospects who are in communication through other means. For instance, respondents wrote:

“[My site] serves primarily as backup that enhances my credibility rather than as the primary mode of attracting clients. I find most technical communication clients through job boards and freelance bid sites.”

“I didn’t really expect to get many new clients from my website, I use it more as my portfolio/online resume/credibility booster *for those who already know something about me* [emphasis mine]. Occasionally, I get a call from someone who wants to hire me who found my website, but it’s not a major source.”

“I send people to it *after we’ve connected in person* [emphasis mine]. It serves as an expanded resume and credibility builder. The samples are particularly of interest to people considering whether to work with me.”

- Even businesses that do rely quite heavily on their Web site to attract new clients report that the site performs certain communication functions but not others, as this one respondent explained:

“I think the site just establishes a level of credibility. . . . The site helps them find [my business] and shows them some of our work, some testimonials from satisfied clients, and samples. They can see from the breadth of it and our team, whose bios are online, that we are “for real.” *Then they call* or fill out our needs assessment *and the conversation from qualified lead to prospect begins* [emphasis mine]. The sales cycle is pretty lengthy:

- 1) First contact (conversion to lead)
- 2) Conversation of lead to prospect (with written estimate/quote)

3) Conversion of prospect to customer (with deposit and signed estimate)

The combination of our service, price, *and manner on the phone* also has a huge amount to do with how they respond to us [emphasis mine].”

So in sum, it’s possible that for small service-oriented businesses such as these technical communication businesses, a Web site is more effective than other communication channels and exchanges at building credibility, among other things, but is less effective than other communication channels and exchanges at closing a commercial transaction with a prospective client.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I’m finding that, on the whole, Web sites for small services-oriented businesses seem to play important communications roles that complement but do not replace the off-Web “real-life” communications that these businesses use to attract and win clients and conduct business.

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