



Does Your Website Have Integrity?

By Michael Harrison

How many times have you visited a website and thought, “that doesn’t look right”.

In a multi-dimensional world most companies employ several marketing channels to promote their business. There might be print advertisements in the newspaper, maybe some radio spots, a couple of slick brochures that you hand out at your first face-to-face meeting. Even the sign over your door makes a statement about your business. But...

...what's the point in using colourful brochures, quality stationery and a nice sign people can see from the street, if people log on to your company website and find out-of-date content, sepia photos (they're so old), incorrect or unsubstantiated material, or text that's clearly been ripped (plagiarised) from another site?

Potential clients WILL check your website and Google your company name. This is the new generation of computer user who knows how to gain maximum benefit from online window shopping. Most make some of their buying decisions based on web research. So...

...if a visitor stops by your online channel and sees a dusty, neglected, outdated site, with photos of staff who left a year ago, and outdated or incorrect information, you're under utilising a great marketing channel, a critical channel to support your company's positioning.

What you say, what you do, how you look (in print and on the web) all have to be in sync or your credibility vaporises before you start. Just because you don't look at your website very often doesn't mean that others don't. Perception is fragile. And on the web, perception is reality.

The web is a great and necessary resource, and if you've laid claim to your parcel of digital real estate, then along with that online property comes responsibilities. And, as a card-carrying member of the online, commercial establishment, you can improve the integrity of the web by keeping your website as upright and straightforward as your real-world business.

The Responsibilities of Site Ownership

As there's little or no oversight on the web, it becomes each Webmaster or business owners' responsibility to police his or her website for anything that might be construed as deceitful. Transparency builds trust. (Oh, and by the way, fake testimonials are transparent frauds.)

So, what can you do to maintain a site that adheres to the same high standards of honesty and integrity upon which you've built your actual business? Here are some suggestions.

1. Never hide costs. This is an all-too-common practice in the realm of e-commerce. The site offers a low-ball price, an unwitting buyer orders the service and discovers that the \$19.95 fee is per month with a \$200 cancellation fee to boot.

Okay, I exaggerate for effect, but you get the idea. Online businesses have lots of room to cram lots of fine print onto their sites. Nothing like reading your rights in four-point text with a magnifying glass.

A business with integrity – a business people can trust, (critical to any service provider trying to build a profitable client base) has nothing to hide. All fees for services rendered are clearly set out with no hidden, “extras”. Restocking fees or a 10% of total order shipping and handling charge are a scam and people know it.

2. Be an authority. Your web site offers the opportunity to establish your know-how and experience. Write helpful articles available to any visitor. Build a site archive – a knowledge base upon which people depend.

That means you don't make up facts and publish them as reality. You check your math – twice. You check your facts using reliable sources like the dictionary, an almanac or a reputable encyclopaedia. Fact checking is essential in building credibility, which indicates a site with integrity.



3. Deliver what you promise. Teasers and come-ons are all over the web, snookering the unsuspecting and short-changing the slow learners. If you don't deliver on your online promises, you won't have a long and expanding list of satisfied clients. You'll have one-time sign-ups who flee the moment they realised that they've been victimised.

4. Keep your content up to date. If you wrote a piece about the future of oil investing back in '03 and it's still on your web site, that article is going to smell horrible. A lot has changed in the oil markets since '03 and the information in your piece is not only useless, it's actually misleading if someone assumes this is your current position on oil futures.

Date all of your posts – blog posts, feature articles, archival content and other timely information. And if it starts to take on a stale odour, toss it and put up something fresh.

- You'll see more repeat visitors (a very good thing) and
- The search engine gods will smile kindly on your site. Fresh content is search engine spider food so keep the news timely and accurate.

5. Say it in plain English. Do you charge a non-refundable fee? Is the initial consultation with the prospect free? What's your privacy policy – an especially important consideration for insurance brokers, financial advisors, accountants and legal counsel who maintain sensitive personal data on the business' hard drives. Put it all out there for prospective clients to see.

6. Nothing says 'integrity' like contact information. Companies that deliver services, for the most part rely on local clientele – people living within a 50 km radius of the service provider's office. So, on your web site be sure to provide all means of contact: telephone (toll-free is best), email address, URL, street and city address, a printable map so people can find you and even a picture of your office building exterior so people recognise when they've arrived.

Business integrity builds trust. In turn, trust creates lasting business relationships. The loss of that trust is almost impossible to regain. So, run your website the same way you run your real-world business – with honesty, decency and with the best interests of your clients always at the fore.



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A noted business speaker, author and consultant, Michael is the creator of the Mini Guide to Business series and the author of four books and numerous articles about business success and related topics.

This article offers an insight into some of the concepts he uses to assist clients to maximize value.

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