



APC Interactive
PART OF THE APC GROUP

Supporting the business process

Ideas for intelligent web sites

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Overview

The majority of web sites today can be characterised as brochure web sites. They give basic information about the company and its products but play no part in the business process. This paper discusses how the Internet can be used to support the business process for technology companies in the finance industry. We show how the Internet can be used to support the sales, deliver and support processes.

Introduction

The majority of corporate web sites can be characterised as 'brochure sites'. A typical navigation bar will show

Home | About the company | Products | Contact | Clients | News | Feedback

This type of site is aimed at prospective customers and generally will do a good job of giving the customer a good impression of the company (if the design is professional) and conveying the information needed to support the sales process. This site will be owned by the marketing function and is a marketing tool. Without question this represents the minimum requirement for a corporate web site.

The Internet however is capable of supporting much more and can bring significant business benefits within the rest of the business process. In doing so it can help give the competitive edge so important to drive sales.

This paper proposes some ideas for web site functions to support technology vendors in the financial market. We show that the Internet can be used to support the sales cycle, product delivery, and post installation support.

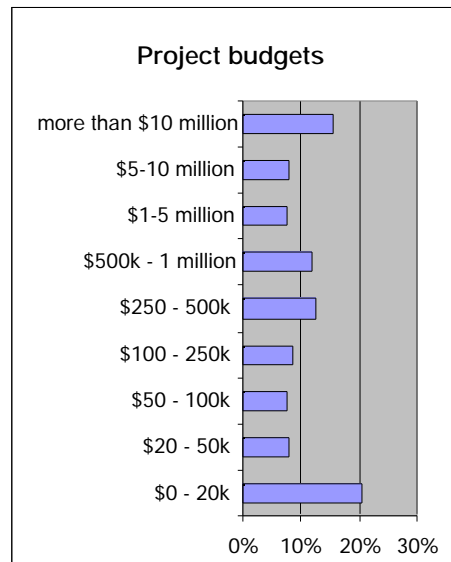
The Finance Technology Market

The web site at <http://www.bobsguide.com> lists finance industry technology vendors and their products and is particularly strong in the key areas of treasury and risk management. An instant poll of visitors to the site indicates the profile of project size on the right. The weighted average project size is around \$2.5million.

To put that further in context, the guide gets over 20,000 visitor sessions per month. Information both from an instant poll and registration data indicates about 25% of visitors who stay on the site are purchasers of technology. Multiplying these numbers up gives a figure of purchasing power in \$billions per month. This is just counting visitors to this one web site.

This technology is highly complex and very specialised. Some of the technology, particularly in the dealing room area, is used in a high-pressure environment where late delivery and subsequent downtime are poorly tolerated. So factors on a buyers mind when purchasing technology are:

- Product features (of course)
- What other companies are using the product? Is there an active user group?
- Is it stable and crash proof?
- How long will it take to install, how is that process to be managed?



- What is the quality of support; is there a formal help desk system in place?

Any web site in this area must address these concerns and demonstrate best practice in meeting these needs. The Internet itself can be used to support the delivery and support areas, and we discuss these in the following.

Web site enhancement

Content management

The content on your web site will need to be changed from time to time, and it is possible to set up a site so that much of the text can be updated from your office using a simple password-protected web form.

Information, which changes frequently such as news items and events, should always be handled in this way.

Linguabots

A linguabot is a software artificial intelligence that can answer natural-language questions from site visitors, and even take them to the appropriate page on there web site to give more information.

For example the eye-trek web page (www.eye-trek.com - Europe) carried on a conversation as in the box on the right.

This can be a useful tool to help your prospective customers understand the product and find the right information. Its fun to use which all helps retain prospective clients on your web site.

Q. what does eye trek do?

A. *Linking Eye-Trek up with your DVD unit or a comparable device will offer you cinema-style movie enjoyment.*

Q. will it damage my eyes?

A. *Well, Eye-Trek has had an uplifting effect on my mental health... Seriously, even before Eye-Trek went into production, it had to undergo a special medical tests. Without those, Olympus wouldn't even be producing it right now.*

And so on...

On-line questions

Visitors to the web site who want to ask questions about the product can type questions into a small web form in a popup window. This alerts an operator who answers the question on-line. An on-line chat session can continue until the visitor's questions are answered.

The calls can be assigned to a call centre operator on a rotating basis, and the chat window turns into an email form when the call centre is closed.

Call-back

A further way of demonstrating responsiveness is to provide a call back function. The visitor enters their name and phone number and an operator calls them back. This essentially provides a toll free calling service internationally.

The call centre operator can be provided with ancillary information such as the web page that the visitor is calling from.

Streaming video

Use video to provide on-line presentations of your product. If you have a video presentation this can often be converted for on-line use.

Sales

Contact management

Most companies run an in-house contact management system. For most organisations this will be the right approach. However you may consider a web-based contact management system if your organisation is global and if you are dealing with global customers.

The Internet allows your account managers to update contact information no matter where they are in the world and be appraised of contacts with the same organisation in other countries. Essentially each branch office is maintaining a common database of contact information on a global basis.

You can be sure that the different parts of a client organisation talk to each other and exchange views. They may even contact their colleagues in other parts of the world to get comparative price quotations and service promises to use in negotiations¹.

Without an automated system it is hard to ensure that different account managers are kept constantly up to date on the contacts with the organisation in other parts of the world.

Installation

Project support

Most project managers will use a PC based product such as Microsoft Project to plan and monitor progress on a project. However the web site can have an important role in communicating information between project members.

Typically an installation project will involve the vendor of the technology product and the customer. It may also involve sub-contractors and co-contractors. The Internet can be used for:

- Assigning work packages to project members
- Reporting progress back to the project manager
- Reporting overall progress to the client
- Repository of project documents
- Delivery of soft deliverables
- Change control
- Time recording

And so on. The Internet delivers major benefits if the project involves several parties, particularly if the project is global in scope.

Support

Help desk

The help desk is a key application for many technology vendors. The first requirement is to provide a mechanism for users to report problems via a web form as an alternative to telephone or email. Many users will prefer to use this for non-urgent items, and may even prefer this for urgent items where the possibility of misunderstanding is reduced if the fault is entered directly by the customer rather than taken down over the telephone. It must allow for files such as log files to be uploaded as part of the reporting procedure.

Whatever method is used for entry, progress reporting can be via the Internet. The progress report can show for example:

- Current status
- Further information required from the client
- Current escalation level and time to next escalation
- Person working on the fault
- Estimated time to fix

Provided the quality of the information is maintained and fault escalation procedures are observed, this can significantly reduce the frequency of follow-up calls and improve customer service.

Clearly for this to work properly the web system has to be tightly integrated with any in-house help desk system – or replace it.

Frequently asked questions / known issues

Use of the help desk can be minimised by providing a resource to help customers solve their own problems. This would include a listing of frequently asked questions, known software problems and workarounds, and so on.

This will only be used if users find that their questions are consistently answered. So if this type of feature is attempted it is important that it is comprehensive. The help desk system can be a useful source of data here.

¹ I certainly used to do this when I ran the IT function in London for a global money broker.

Change control and software inventory

In order to provide good support it is essential that the support organisation have as much information as possible about the technology in place and the infrastructure supporting it on the client's site.

The Internet can be used to inform the client about the information currently held on file about the client, and allow the change it if necessary. This would include things like operating system version, hardware, communications infrastructure and so on.

While it is unlikely that any customer is going to regularly update this type of information un-prompted, there are ways of prompting an update:

- An email listing the current data and suggesting the changes are entered via the web site. This could be generated automatically
- A summary of the customer installation could be shown with other data that the customer does access regularly.
- The information provided as part of the fault reporting system, so that the infrastructure information is updated when it is needed.

Library functions

From time to time, most technology vendors produce a variety of documents and computer files. Some of these files are available to the public, and other documents available to clients.

Examples are:

- Brochures
- Product specifications
- White papers on various subjects.
- Software documentation
- Technical documents
- Release notes
- Software patches
- Device drivers

The web site can include a library of such documents stored digitally. Forms in a password-protected area would be used to upload files and assign them to a set of library indexes. Each document would have a title, overview, keywords, audience and so on and users would be able to search by keyword or browse by index heading.

User groups and discussion forums

We would not recommend an open discussion forum on most web sites for a number of reasons. However it can play a part in a restricted customer support area. There are other functions that could be offered to a user group:

- Contact information for other user group members
- Meeting schedules / booking
- Distribution / archive of meeting minutes

Recruitment

Your web site should be used to advertise jobs. This both helps your recruitment at a low cost, and also emphasises to clients that you are a growing organisation.

You will need to be able to maintain the jobs database on-line. Candidates should at least be able to respond with an email, if not upload their CV through a web page.

Use the web site to encourage recruits by including a section on employment.

PR and Investor relations

Many companies are using their web sites to communicate with investors. The web site can be updated with press releases, annual report, chairman's statement etc. These can be uploaded using a password-protected web form. The IR update system can be separated from the rest and available for your PR company to update directly.

An important feature of such a web area is the embargo on some press releases required for regulatory purposes. The software should support an embargo and ensure that releases can only be viewed after the embargo date.

Conclusion

While the initial impetus for a web site tends to come from the marketing department, the Internet has a place in product delivery and customer support. By demonstrating these features to prospective clients, you show in a very concrete way your commitment to support – a key issue to prospective customers.