

Differentiating Your Website

Three best practices to enhance the visitor experience

by Jerry Hart

In today's highly competitive and perceived parity markets, it's not what you sell, but how you sell that matters, and it's the same with a website. It's not what you offer on the website that matters most, it's your presentation and the engaging, helpful and respectful interaction you have with each visitor. In short, the website visitor's interaction has become the last, and possibly most important, bastion of competitive differentiation.

Of the dozens of ways to engage visitors, I've summarized three of the most-important best practices that are shared among the most engaging and differentiating websites.

1) Memorable websites have a personality.

How do you give your website the right dose of personality? Think of your website as a one-on-one conversation. Just imagine sitting in a coffee shop talking informally with a customer. That's the starting point for your sales approach; a more personable and appropriate "human" voice will come naturally.

When you picture the coffee shop scenario, you quickly see how inappropriate (not to say ridiculous) some of the more traditional, formal styles of customer communication can sound on a website. Drop the jargon and the heavy-handed sales pitch. Be as honest as you can, and talk like a human being. Refreshing idea, isn't it?

For example at www.harpsetc.com, one of only six harp stores in the county, they understand how enticing call-to-action conversational language can be. The navigation bar includes, "Test drive a harp." Doesn't that sound like fun? Or "Hear before you buy", and "Is the harp for me? Find out more." The audience loves to read on the web as if you're speaking with them. If you know it's effective with you personally, then why not give it back to your website visitor.

2) Guide your visitors through your website.

The best websites never leave the visitors stranded or confused. Simple links like "Read more here" act as a guide, directing each step of the visitor's experience. Ultimately, each of these small steps will all add together and will affect your overall conversation rate from a casual visitor to a prized customer.

I call these kinds of variables "micro conversions" because they are all small (microscopic, even) steps toward full conversion. A micro conversion is something that you should test and measure. Don't be afraid to experiment with different offers and directions to see what engages your visitors the most.

Micro conversions can be tracked by measuring the click-through of links, or the read time for content, or the bounce rate for headlines and copy. Full conversion means persuading your visitors to do what you want them to do. It could be subscribing to a newsletter, downloading an audio file, buying a product, selling a service, or whatever. It should reflect your website's business objective.

3) It's all about the offer.

Always think: WIIFM (or "What's In It For Me?") The best websites engage the visitor by giving them something of value, such as a whitepaper, a free consultation, or a short clip of audio from a recent speaking engagement or seminar. People love when you extend the olive branch. And with each offer, remember to tie in some urgency behind it with a call to action. For example, once a visitor reads your whitepaper, what action would you like them to take next? Make it easy for visitors to follow your "bread crumbs."

Many websites lack incentives or offers. Some websites that do offer additional information forget to collect visitor data, making follow-up impossible. One easy way to collect e-mail addresses and opt-in permission is via a signup box on your website. Place your signup box in a visible place on your homepage, and other appropriate pages. But remember that when people offer you their names and contact information, they demand immediate gratification. So, link them directly to the material they requested. Don't make them wait 24 hours to get a follow up email.

It's all about offer, urgency, call to action and then BOOM! You can sit back and watch your click-thru rates soar.

This is just the beginning.

Differentiating your website is an ongoing challenge. So many websites look alike because they fail to find new, meaningful ways to engage the visitor. In fact, improving the "conversation" with each visitor has become a missing link in the sales process. The missing link is where a prospect or customer does not feel any special experience when surfing your website. There are an unlimited number of creative ways to engage your visitors. But, if you start by understanding these three best practices, you will be on your way to winning the hearts and minds of your visitors.

Jerry Hart is the founder and principal of [Hart Creative Marketing, Inc.](http://HartCreativeMarketing.com) Hart Creative Marketing's mission is to help businesses of all sizes optimize their web presence. If you'd like more information on these and other best practices for website design and online marketing programs, please contact Jerry at hart@hartcreativemarketing.com or call (925) 705-0372.