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Driving Traffic to Your Website

by: Joy Maples

You just met the most gorgeous person on the face of the earth. Your heartbeat quickens. You look. Working up your courage, you ask for a lunch date and you find yourself sitting across from this beautiful person and?nothing. The exterior, though lovely, cannot make up for the lack of wit, depth and conversation.

Welcome to the World Wide Web. Flash and Java Script allure us with their beauty. They make websites look gorgeous, cool, fun. Yet, as a search engine crawler or spider, all you see are pretty pictures or cool graphics. No key words, no HTML tags or titles, no conversation.

It seems everyone has a website these days, or, at least they know they should be working on one. Though this article does not focus on website construction, it?s important to understand that part of driving traffic to your site depends on your site having good bones?clear, logical navigation and clean, well-written code. Gone are the days of ?build it and they will come.?

A quick search on Google for the key words, ?bluegrass music? yields more than three million results. How do you attract visitors to your site? How do you gain exposure, and start a conversation with your audience?

Optimize
To gain exposure, you have to optimize. That?s a fancy word for making sure that your website has an open door, which allows the spiders, crawlers, and ?bots?the electronic creatures that search engines send out to scan, rank and catalog your website. When a user enters a set of key words into a search engine, these crawler programs categorize the resulting list of websites. Make sure you use the key words in the upper third of your home page, within the content of your site, and also list them within the Meta tags in the HTML code. If you are not the one building the site, ask your webmaster to input your key words into the Meta tag section of your source code. For example, if you sell musical instruments out of a Nashville storefront, your list could include the following key words in the meta field: ?music store? and ?Nashville music store,? followed by a string of words describing the instruments or dealer lines you sell: ?Martin guitars? or ?Taylor guitars,? for example. You can get specific: ?Martin D-28,? or remain general ?Martins.? Of course it?s best to do both.

HTML code is the acronym for ?HyperText Markup Language,? the primary language used for the creation of web pages. ?Meta tags? are the tags, or labels that can be included in HTML source code. The most common use for them is to allow the website manager to input key words into a web document, making it easier for individuals and search engines to find you online.

If you use Flash in your navigation, add a row of HTML links across the bottom of your home page to allow the spiders in and through your site (as well as those non-technological types who don?t have flash player or a high speed connection). Or add a site map to list the HTML

titles of each page of your site. If you use Flash to construct your text, again, the spiders just see a pretty picture and don?t grab that word or group of words to add into their algorithm, or formula, to rank your site. People complain that HTML text isn?t as pretty and doesn?t give you as many options for type styles. Remember, we?re trying to get past pretty to a place where great conversations can be started, new audiences can be reached, and CDs and musical instruments can be sold. For more information about optimization, go to http://www.searchenginewatch.com [1].

The Conversation

Now it?s time to start the conversation. You need content. Content is defined as all forms of information including text, pictures, animation, video and sound recordings. It doesn?t have to be fancy. You can shoot your own video and post it onto any number of social networking sites like YouTube, and simply link back to your own site (just cut and paste the code written for you on YouTube). Start a blog, or online journal about your journey through the cities and towns where you perform.

?Artists have to be willing to allow access,? said Kissy Black of Lotos Nile, a Nashville-based media and marketing firm. ?The (music) industry is in a state of flux. The barriers are breaking down. We are entering an era of participation and content,? said Black. ?We need to connect the dots between the artist and the fan base. There are less middlemen and more personal involvement. People don?t want to be fed; they want to be involved. It?s not enough to have a new record. You?ve got to have a story,? said Black, ?and the artist has to be willing to put that sweat equity in to make it happen.?

The Internet is a great environment to tell your own story. When you post or update your content, send an email blast, or add an entry in a personal blog, you have the potential to connect with thousands of your closest friends. In the past, sweat equity meant literally connecting one person at a time?shaking one hand at a time, passing out one flyer at a time, calling or visiting one radio broadcaster at a time. Although it can still mean that, you have an additional tool with the Internet to multiply the number of people you are connecting with. With this tool comes the responsibility to keep your website updated. This doesn?t have to mean a daily update. Start small. Collect email addresses and send a note when you have a gig, or send a brief update via email once each month.

Adding fresh, relevant content is a great tool to keep the traffic coming. If you don?t have a lot of time to add specific content, don?t be afraid to link out to other relevant content. Just make sure it opens a new window instead of taking them out of your own site. Relevant links in and relevant links out add up to a better ranking by the search engines and expand your content without you having to do more work.

The purpose of these tools is manifold. Although driving traffic to your website is certainly one purpose, ultimately you are trying to build a fan base.

?We need to do more than sell a .99 cent music download. We want to turn people on to the music, turn them into fans that don?t own just one song, but own the entire catalog, and the T-shirt for the artists we represent,? said Black. ?I don?t mean to sound corny, but I think music makes the world a better place. When I hear a great band, I want to tell all my friends that they?ve just got to hear them!?

Other options for driving traffic
Setting up a page on MySpace is definitely a good idea. ?But don?t stop there,? says Bluegrass Blog co-author Brance Gilahan, ?it's a powerful tool, but it's not a destination. A lot of bands are relying too heavily on MySpace because it's easy to update and it's tied into that large network. It's easier for your band name, as a domain name, to come up in a Google search, than it is for your MySpace page to come up,? said Gilahan.

By all means, get yourself on MySpace, Blogger, Wordpress, or any of the number of sites available. Let those pages be another entry point into your own website. That?s what the ?web? is all about. It?s about taking one thread and running it through cyberspace, connecting with others and opening doors for people to come in, sit for a while, chat, and maybe buy a CD, or a ticket to your next gig.

There are many other ways to drive traffic to your site. The tried and true ?traditional? ways of television, radio and print advertising are still viable. There are also web and banner ads. Do a quick search of the key words you believe would get people to your site. See who ranks at the top of the results. If those top results seem like a good fit for your business and are appropriate partners, approach them about doing an ad on their site. You can also pay to have your website show up as a ?sponsored? result on a variety of search engines and indexes. Sponsored results generally run above the search engine?s regular, organic results, or down the right side of the results page. The top three engines are Google, Yahoo! Search, and MSN Search. Go to http://www.seoconsultants.com/search-engines/ [2] for a list of the top ten search engines, as well as the clickable entry points to submit your website to each of them.

Be shameless in the promotion of your website address. Paste it on everything you have: T-shirts, CDs, pens and hats, as well as any give away items. Banners and other signage are also a great way to promote your address. Even the shirt on your back will work, especially if you wear it during a gig.

Though budgets often constrict, be creative. (Wear that same shamelessly self-promoting shirt while videotaping a song for YouTube). If time is the culprit, hire a professional to implement just a few of these tactics.

With a little HTML and a little time, you will be on the road to being discovered?even favored?in the digital realm.

Joy Maples owns Maples Communications and is a former member of the International Bluegrass Music Museum?s Board of Trustees. She is learning the upright bass in her spare time.

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[2] http://www.seoconsultants.com/search-engines/
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