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Best Practice

The e-business enterprise and the 'Web-first' principle of e-marketing

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Received (in revised form): 18 July 2000

Abstract

This paper looks at how an e-business 'virtual' enterprise, one primarily reliant on the Internet for all interaction and communication with its audiences, can develop and deploy sophisticated marketing campaigns using the Internet as the principal medium. As such, it outlines the principle of 'Web-first' marketing, and draws on practice and experience at Oracle to illustrate the guidelines for 'Web-first' engagement and the benefits that such a strategy can deliver. Finally, it looks at the challenges that await e-marketers as the Internet continues to evolve.

Keywords: E-marketing,
profiling, content,
communities, personalisation,
new digital devices

Marketing and the Web

The Web has been a marketing tool far longer than it has been a vehicle for sales, support or service. Websites were originally exploited by marketers as a new medium of 'brochureware', offering static collateral to a rapidly expanding audience of online customers. By 1998, with the arrival of new technologies and the realisation that the Web could create serious cost and time efficiencies while reaching a global market, most Web-minded companies had transformed their Internet presence from an ancillary marketing vehicle into a primary point of sale.

At its current stage of evolution, the Internet presents many new opportunities for marketers, with the potential for advanced marketing techniques that deliver high value to companies and their audiences, and which can be closely measured and analysed for further refinement. So profound and pervasive is the effect of the Internet that today's marketers are cautioned by Mark Jarvis, vice president of marketing at Oracle, 'There is no longer any conventional wisdom in marketing. All traditional marketing knowledge has gone away. The marketing *model* is more important than the marketing campaign.'

The e-business enterprise

The Internet is fast becoming the first place people look for information about a company, and to purchase products or services. In ten years' time, the majority of business-to-consumer commerce will be conducted on the Net. Datamonitor, for example, has recently estimated that almost a quarter of consumer banking in the UK will be done online by as early

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**The use of the
Web ...**

as 2004,¹ and IDC predicts that about 20 per cent of European shoppers should be regular online buyers by 2003.² And consumers are the laggards in the e-commerce arena. With a far greater penetration of Internet use in the corporate sector, the majority of business-to-business transactions will be carried out online by 2003. Indeed, 42 per cent of companies with over 500 employees already order goods and services online, and NOP has predicted that British businesses can expect a fivefold increase in online business transactions by the end of next year.³

**... can have major
impact on the
bottom line**

The increasing use of the Internet as a medium for communications and transactions removes a company from direct interface with its audiences. This is particularly true of businesses like software or music, where the product sold need have no tangible presence (digital downloads replacing CDs and CD-ROMs), and no physical contact between a provider and its audiences is necessary. Software and music can both be sampled, paid for and downloaded from anywhere by anyone, anywhere, with the entire process taking place in virtual space. This can have a dramatic effect on a company's bottom line — at Oracle the decision to sell software online, together with other e-business initiatives such as Web-only collateral, server consolidation, and employee self-service applications for expenses, HR, travel and purchasing, etc, have helped boost operating margins from 19.4 per cent to 31.4 per cent and contributed to a \$1bn overall saving.

The Web-first principle

For e-business enterprises, building an online identity must become the top priority. Customers must be attracted, won and retained, their trust and loyalty cultivated and their individual preferences anticipated, identified and catered for via the Internet. This means using the Internet as the primary vehicle for marketing, as well as sales and customer service and support. This practice can be thought of as the 'Web-first' principle of e-marketing.

There are at least five advantages to adopting the Web-first principle.

- ***It is fast.*** Once content has been designed and created, it can be disseminated globally, eliminating lead times for print and distribution. Responses can be immediate — all that is required is one click on a link in an e-mail newsletter, partner website or banner ad — and those responses can be recorded instantly and automatically. Campaigns can thus be deployed, measured, assessed and appropriately refined in a fraction of the time required to undertake an offline campaign. In the Internet world, the fast will beat the slow. Marketing must move at Internet speed, and we should move away from the traditional long-term 'campaign' marketing to a model where we think of a campaign one day and execute it the next, via the Web.
- ***It is cost-efficient.*** Content is created only once and disseminated electronically, incurring no print, storage, mailing or distribution costs. Responses are received, stored, measured and analysed automatically and in real time, removing the need for costly and time-consuming human administration.

**The fast will
beat the slow**

Self-service

- ***It is interactive.*** All e-marketing initiatives, be they banner ads, links to other sites, URL name-checks in online articles or e-mail newsletters, put the recipient only one click away from an information point or point of sale. This immediacy removes the delay between a person viewing an offline ad or piece of collateral, and remembering to go and investigate or purchase the product advertised. The Web is an ideal vehicle for *self-service* — visitors choose and collect the information they require without it having to be requested and sent manually. Interactivity is also the cornerstone of the online community, which enables valuable dialogue between an enterprise and its online visitors.
- ***It collects data.*** Provided the right technology is in place, the Web is an extremely fast and effective vehicle for requesting, receiving and aggregating visitor data, both explicit (directly supplied by the visitor) and implicit (concerning a visitor's actions and behaviour when online).
- ***It simplifies personalisation.*** The dynamic, data-driven nature of the Web makes it by far the best vehicle for delivering timely, personalised information to a visitor in a variety of forms.

Consistent messages
build brands

Potentially there is a sixth advantage, and that is the greater consistency of message made possible by central creation and electronic distribution. Consistency of message is vital in building brand values, and centralised controlled e-marketing communications make this possible.

E-marketing is very different from its offline equivalent, and marketers may as well throw away the rule book when they start using the Web-first principle. Indeed, the rules of Web first are still being written, and are probably likely to change within six months. However, the following four general rules are useful guidelines for successful e-marketing campaigns.

Use your
information

Rule One — Store everything, analyse everything

Because of its interactive nature, the Web offers an unrivalled opportunity for virtual enterprises to learn more about their audiences. However, it is pointless to solicit information from visitors if it is not then put to good use. It is essential that all information collected on the website is stored in a single powerful data warehouse — a combination

Figure 1: Consolidate your marketing databases

Figure 2: Track everything

Build profiles of your visitors

of a high-powered, scalable relational database and advanced business intelligence tools for analysing the data within — where it can be sliced, diced and analysed in every conceivable way. Every piece of information, no matter how seemingly trivial, must go into this data warehouse so that true visitor profiles can be built (Figure 1). Due to the significance of its role in compiling profiles, Oracle has termed this central underlying data warehouse an 'e-profiler'.

Monitor your visitors

The visitor data gathered should be as much implicit as explicit. Oracle's website has programmed 'landing pads', Web pages which track user activity while gathering sales and marketing data (Figure 2). Each visitor's behaviour is tracked uniquely, even when their identity is unknown (where they are not a registered visitor or subscriber). Data from the landing pads are stored in the e-profiler for subsequent analysis.

Using landing pads, Oracle is able to monitor visitor behaviour to a fine level of granularity. Take the example of this frequent visitor. A US-based male, he generally logged on to the website early in the morning, between 6.40am and 8.00am. On his first visit he looked at the press releases, and then clicked on a tell-me-more link (which is also a landing pad) to get information on a certain product. He then went on to read about practical applications of the product. On 20 January 2000, he ordered and paid for \$4,273.03 of Oracle products online. All of these movements were tracked on the landing pads, from first look, through awareness, through decision to purchase, and fulfilment.

Explicit and implicit knowledge

Information about the routes taken by individuals through websites can be used in two entirely separate ways. Firstly it provides information about each visitor's exact interests, both explicitly — in a specific product, say — and implicitly — for example, if a visitor looked for information on a specific product and then clicked on to case studies to see how that product had been used in a large banking operation, this might indicate that s/he, too, worked for a similar enterprise. This is essential information for building profiles.

Activity-tracking data can also suggest ways in which the site can be restructured to create maximum navigability and visitor satisfaction. This is invaluable information for those responsible for new e-marketing disciplines like information design and usability monitoring. Information design is the remit of the e-marketer rather than the Web designer, as its principles are practical rather than aesthetic. For instance, the animated flash introductions currently in vogue can be outstanding examples of the site designer's art, but quickly become irritating to recurring visitors, even when the option to 'skip intro' is offered.

Information designers cannot rely on the offline rule book. A recent study carried out by Stanford University and the Poynter Institute has shown that, online, people read text first and look at pictures second, the reverse of their behaviour with real-world print media.⁴ Moreover, while the Stanford research notes that surfers will read 75 per cent of an online article on average compared with only 30 per cent of a print media article, their patience is shorter elsewhere. The average person spends only seven seconds on a Web page and will not wait for longer than 45 seconds for a page to download. Therefore designing information for instant availability, immediate interest and easy navigation, together with well-designed technology infrastructure, are key components of e-marketing. The information supplied by route-tracking landing pads can be used to create 'funnels' — fast tracks to key transactional destinations such as the checkout or the subscription page, to prevent visitors from losing patience and going elsewhere.

**You have
seven seconds**

Rule Two — Content, content, content

While good information design will enhance a user's enjoyment of visiting a site, content is the real key to keeping a company or brand front of mind with customers and other audiences, and it must be kept fresh, relevant and appealing to ensure that visitors return often. Online content can be delivered in many and creative ways and should be tailored to three basic layers: the mass customer base, customer communities and the individual customer. Examples of ways in which the Web enables innovative content delivery are as follows.

Content vs design

Direct e-mail

Cleverly targeted, permission-based direct e-mail can reap far greater and more immediate rewards than its offline equivalent. Speaking in April 2000 in *Salon Magazine's* online publication, Hans-Peter Brondmo, founder of Post Communications and e-mail marketing guru, observed that the level of personalisation of a direct e-mail has a directly proportional effect on the response rate. In his experience, response rates rise from between 6 and 10 per cent for untargeted communications to 17 per cent for targeted e-mails and 32 per cent for individualised communications. The experience at Oracle is that traditional offline direct mail has a response rate of just 2 or 3 per cent, but this rises steeply to 76 per cent with direct e-mail. The company also gets ten times more sales leads from the Internet than from direct mail. Oracle is cutting direct mail in favour of e-mail, which will save the company around \$100,000 per drop and \$15m annually overall.

High response rates

Differentiate yourself

Organisations are already using direct e-mail in well-thought-out ways to differentiate themselves. Some send information that is useful rather than directly promotional, such as the Wegmans grocery chain, which sends out suggested weekly meal plans to subscribers based on dietary profiles they have aggregated in the database. Others rely on individuals' previous purchases to recommend new products. While e-marketing remains in its infancy and Web surfers remain relatively tolerant of the direct e-mail they receive, carefully targeted campaigns such as this will probably continue to be successful. However, the medium will have to evolve very quickly to survive. Jupiter Communications has recently estimated that the average US surfer will receive up to 1,600 unsolicited e-mails every year by 2005, suggesting that people will soon tire of receiving direct e-mail, in the same way as they have tired of direct mail.⁵

E-casting — Using the Internet as a media channel

Dynamic, targeted content also forms the basis of another e-marketing strategy Oracle has pioneered with great success. Analysis of visitor behaviour on Oracle websites showed that customers and potential customers were reading the press information (releases) that the company had previously relied on the media to disseminate on its behalf, with no certainty that they would do so either consistently or accurately. In one instance a press release was hit by 2,270 customers and only 30 journalists. With this knowledge, Oracle was able to harness the disintermediating effect of the Internet and bypass the traditional media in two ways. One was by creating its own Internet *broadcast* network – the E-Business Network (EBN).

Harness disintermediation

Launched in February 2000, EBN (Figure 3) has brought about a sea change in the way Oracle presents information on the Web. Eschewing

Figure 3: E-business network

**Innovation,
tailored**

static text-based content, EBN broadcasts (or rather, e-casts) five separate multimedia channels of text, images, streamed video and audio, 24 hours a day, every day. Each channel is tailored to a different audience: a technology channel for developers and database administrators, a business channel for CEOs and business leaders, an e-learning channel where customers can learn technical tips and tricks, a Webstyle channel with e-casts showing how the Internet is transforming the world, and a news channel with real-time newsfeeds from ON24, Reuters and Oracle itself. Across the network, content is not simply about Oracle, either. It includes interviews with, and input from, partners and customers, and one highly popular feature is the 'Geek of the Week', a profile of a leading light in the world of e-developers. The style throughout is *Wired-meets-Red Herring* rather than the less accessible traditional corporate-speak.

Who sees what?

Within two to three weeks, EBN gained 44,000 viewers worldwide. Because they are asked to register before viewing, Oracle knows exactly who, where and what every one of those viewers is, what channels they choose and which e-casts (Internet TV programmes) they watch. This information assists in tailoring future programmes to suit tastes. EBN is available in nine languages, covering 93 per cent of the world population.

Be your own reporter — News bullets

This kind of media disintermediation (paradoxical though the term is) has also inspired Oracle to revise its PR strategy. The new rash of news portal sites pick up press releases from the PR newswire and post them indiscriminately alongside feeds from Reuters and other 'media' wires, so that people searching for information on a specific company or topic are delivered both company press releases and 'real' news from journalists. In theory, this means that companies no longer have to rely on the media to get their news across. In practice, though, 'real' news items tended to be more widely read because of their more readable journalistic style.

**How to address
new audiences**

Oracle experimented with posting one-paragraph 'news bullets' instead of the traditional three- or four-page press releases, giving the bullets almost tabloid-style headlines to attract attention. An early experiment demonstrated that a news bullet with the headline 'Are you certifiable?', referring to a certification programme for business partners, gained 333:1 more hits than a press release traditionally entitled 'Oracle announces...'. The company now presents around 40 per cent of news releases as news bullets, and by including a specific 'tell-me-more' hyperlink at the end of each bullet, it can track how many people find that particular piece of news interesting, and also monitor their movements after they click on the link to get to the site. Oracle now finds that around 80 per cent of leads come from press releases and bullets on its website.

Additionally, Oracle has formed an internal 'newsroom', with local country PR managers reporting news up to the 'bureau chief' for worldwide dissemination. Country PR managers act as beat 'reporters',

Figure 4: Hotel and e-seminar attendees

and send local news items such as customer wins, awards, milestones and local successes to the corporate news bureau chief, who issues them as 'bullets' via the newswires. This increases visibility at a global level of good news stories which were previously only available on the local country websites, and often only in that country's language.

The virtual roadshow — E-seminars

Traditional roadshows are expensive, in terms of organisational effort, staff attendance and budget. With almost the full range of marketing activities necessary to support such an event — mailshots to promote the event, location selection, logistics and set-up, on-site demos and presentations, catering, staff attendance, etc — roadshows are not a small undertaking. There is also little guarantee of a good audience attendance as many factors may mitigate a delegate's presence, such as limited time availability, travel considerations, etc.

With the Internet, expensive roadshows can be complemented, or even entirely replaced, by e-seminars. These online shows have many advantages, both for the staging company and for attendees. Costs are virtually reduced to zero, physical location is no longer an inhibitor to attendance, and delegates can log on from anywhere in the world and take only one or two hours from their day. Additionally, it becomes possible to hold many more e-seminars on varied topics, tailoring them to the most popular areas of interest, as they are so easy to execute.

Oracle now gains 600 per cent more attendance at its virtual roadshows than conventional ones (Figure 4), and has reduced costs from \$350 per attendee to about \$2.

Rule Three — Create communities

Belonging to a community is a natural human instinct, but the desired nature of the community has changed. People no longer gravitate to

**Educate
electronically...**

**...better and
cheaper**

The Internet gives immediacy...

those living physically close to them, because clusters of people have generally lost the common interests shared by traditional farming or local business communities. Crucially, people are also no longer prepared to spend time finding out whether their physical neighbours are sufficiently like-minded to form a social relationship. The desire for immediacy has penetrated even as far as social bonding, and the Internet provides a convenient solution by enabling people instantaneously to join a community or communities in which everyone shares the same interests, be they work-related, lifestyle-related, belief-related or specialist.

Given its existence outside physical space, its communications-based architecture and its easy accessibility, the Web is ideally suited for the creation of communities. Indeed, the online community is a format that was flourishing on the Net long before Amazon and eBay first set up shop, long even before Netscape's invention of the browser made surfing the Web a non-technical activity that practically anyone could do. People have been joining independent online communities such as chatrooms, newsgroups and bulletin boards for almost ten years — an eternity in Internet terms.

Everyone who visits a company's website shares a common interest in that company, and therefore becomes part of that company's community. But of course, the specific objects of their interest vary. As the second largest software company in the world, Oracle attracts the interest of a wide variety of people: employees, users/potential users (further segmented according to which products they use), business leaders, technology partners, consulting partners, media, investors, governments and analysts. More recently the company has introduced products and incubating services for e-business start-ups, generating interest from that group of people too.

...and creates new communities

To retain the interest of these diverse groups, and to form better profiles of their members, Oracle has established different Web communities. Each community, from database technologists through partners and start-ups to applications users, has a separate area on, or linked to, the Oracle.com website, where they can find tailored content, special offers, details of offline events and an area where they can

Figure 5: Oracle online communities

meet and chat with other community members. In return for this value-added content and privileges, members are asked to input information about themselves when they subscribe, and are offered the opportunity to update this profile as and when they wish. All of this information is, of course, stored in the e-profiler database.

Over time, the e-profiler aggregates explicit data about community members — their job role, e-mail address, contact details and so on — and serves as a cross-reference for people who belong to multiple communities. It also collects implicit data — the areas on the website that the visitor looked at the most, the news bullets or releases that they found interesting, the e-casts on EBN that they watched. The aggregation of this data in the e-profiler makes the task of further segmentation significantly easier and less time-consuming, enabling the marketer to identify and target smaller groups, according to even the most complex parameters, with the minimum of difficulty.

Easier segmentation

Rule Four — Personalise

Accurate personalisation

The logical outcome of continuously profiling every visitor to a site is that, after a period of several months, the information becomes sufficient to provide truly personalised information and services. The information Oracle has collected in its e-profiler over the last nine months is now sufficient for the company to start delivering an accurately personalised Web page for every subscriber. The scope for innovative personalised information delivery is significantly increased, and at the same time made easier, with the existence of a central profiler data warehouse.

E-marketing is universal

While this paper has discussed the ways in which the adoption of the Web-first principle has changed the way that Oracle carries out its marketing activities, this is not to suggest that the benefits of e-marketing are limited to those companies operating in the high-tech sector.

The changing marketing mix

E-marketing is becoming an increasingly large part of the marketing mix across almost every industry, and its application appears to grow in sophistication almost daily. Personalised websites and direct e-mails, for instance, are increasingly used by consumer-oriented companies to deliver greater value to customers, particularly in the media and financial services sectors where personalisation is respectively useful (each customer is interested in different topics) and critical (customers want to see their own personal account details).

The business-to-business sector, meanwhile, has seized upon the concept of communities, hence the development of the industry exchange sites discussed above, in which participants are welcomed as community members and have access to special deals as a reward for membership. The past year has seen the establishment of global online exchanges across a wide range of industries, including aviation, retail, networking and automotive. Virtual seminars and exhibitions are taking off too — as evidenced by the recent establishment of expocentric.com, a company which hosts virtual exhibitions to complement offline business-to-business and business-to-consumer events.

Future challenges

The future of e-marketing

Perhaps a fifth rule for 'Web-first' should be to be flexible, and be prepared. Very flexible and very prepared, in fact, as the Internet landscape is changing at such a rate that all of the activities Oracle and other organisations are currently undertaking may, and probably will, be out of date in six months' time. A look into the near future gives some idea of the e-marketing challenges that may be just around the corner.

Changing business models

The way in which companies are selling — and people are buying — on the Internet is changing. For now, most companies are employing the direct method — you want to buy a computer from Dell, you go to the Dell website, you want to buy a book from Amazon, you go the Amazon website, and so on. Of course, the advantage with this is that the visitor is captured on the site, and the company is in control of the entire experience, from the information and customer service they provide to the brand image that they project.

The prevalence of this direct model may prove to be short-lived, however. In the business-to-consumer world, the monopoly of the direct sales site is being undermined by online buying services which operate in a variety of ways — from the longer-established auction sites to group buying sites where consumers can club together to buy advertised products at bulk prices, and intelligent agent-based sites which shop around the Web on behalf of the consumer for the best price on the desired product. In the business-to-business world, the direct model is being superseded to a growing extent by the exchange model, an online marketplace where all participants in a supply chain come together to buy, sell, bid, negotiate and share resources such as freight shipments. Exchanges are basically vertical industry portals ('vortals') that aim to optimise supply-chain efficiencies, enable electronic transactions between companies and drive down costs.

Vortals

If an enterprise participates in any of these models, it means that customers will be far less likely to come directly to that company's website, as the intermediary site enables them to shop around for the best deal. Within such models the opportunities for e-marketing are less obvious, but are if anything more important. These new models drive down prices to such an extent that it will no longer be possible for rival companies to compete on a price basis. Therefore, companies must find other differentiators to attract and retain custom, as well as create and retain partnerships. Those companies with sophisticated e-marketing techniques which can communicate with customers and partners on a personalised basis, demonstrate a high level of knowledge and understanding and anticipate their needs will continue to be more successful, even with the competition under the same roof.

E-marketing — From cost centre to zero cost

Traditionally, marketing has been seen as a cost centre — an expensive and necessary function with high-spend activities and no revenue return. Financial controllers are continually bemoaning the spend on exhibition

attendance, advertising, roadshows, mailshots, etc. However, e-marketing has the potential to turn that around. As Mark Jarvis, Oracle vice president of marketing, predicts, 'Marketing, in two years time, will be zero cost.' Not only will it be zero cost, but it will be the largest generator of sales leads, overtaking traditional sales programmes.

The proliferation of interactive devices

E-marketers should also prepare for the imminent explosion in interactive devices. While most people — consumers and business customers — currently access the Internet via a desktop PC or Mac, the numbers of people purchasing alternative access devices like WAP phones, interactive games consoles and interactive TV are increasing steadily. Datamonitor, in its recent IMPACT survey of consumer online habits, found that 30 per cent of the European population already owns two or more devices which either are, or have the potential to be, interactive, while a significant 13 per cent already own three and 2.2 per cent own all four.⁶ We are clearly heading for a multi-device world, where business customers as well as consumers will be using a variety of devices to access the Internet, surf, make decisions and buy.

E-marketers should, then, also be turning their thoughts to ways in which these platforms can be harnessed in addition to the PC Internet. The wireless Internet is so embryonic at present that it is impossible to extend an existing e-marketing strategy to this platform, given the size of the average screen, the limitations of the display and the slowness of the connection. This is not to say that WAP phones cannot already become a useful tool for the dissemination of short, timely, direct e-mails. However, two technologies are due to arrive in the next three years that will open up a wide array of wireless e-marketing opportunities. The imminent arrival of 3G wireless technology will bring fast, high-bandwidth Internet connections for mobile devices that will speed up the entire wireless Web to 2Mbps, making it possible to stream video and audio to mobile devices. Secondly, the emergence of location-specific services will enable companies automatically to identify where a mobile customer (or potential customer) is, and deliver very specific information to their mobile device — for example, if a customer happened to be in the vicinity of a bricks-and-mortar outlet where there happened to be a sale, or where a product they had been interested in was in stock, a message could be delivered to them to this effect.

Bypassing humans?

Looking further ahead, the prospects for e-marketers become distinctly more outlandish. The long-predicted 'intelligent home' is at last taking its first steps into reality, with technologies from companies like Sun Microsystems and the Bluetooth consortium enabling fridges, toasters, cookers and video recorders to run a basic operating system, and to be networked to each other and thence to the Internet. Futurologists have visions of the fridge that knows when it has run out of milk, and either e-mails the owner to alert them or automatically orders more via a

**Pervasive access
to the Internet**

Without wires

**Intelligent
machinery**

grocery shopping website; or the cooker that downloads the recipe of the day from the Web.

Intelligent agents

Similarly, the not-so-far-off advent of ‘shopbots’ — personalised intelligent agents that roam the Web in search of special offers and bargain deals on the things its owner has told it he/she likes, wants or needs — also hints at a future world in which browsing, selecting and purchasing is done by machines. It is therefore not impossible to imagine a time when e-marketing professionals may have to bypass the human customer entirely, and find ways to persuade intelligent fridges to order one dairy’s milk rather than a rival’s, for example, or a car to tell its driver to fill up with one brand of petrol rather than another.

Virtual operation

What we can know for certainty, however, is that the increasing tendency of enterprises towards ‘virtual’ operation, combined with the accelerating evolution of the Internet and its attendant technologies, promise to make the next few years an exciting journey of innovation and discovery for all e-marketing professionals.

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