Sign shop Web design: What works and what doesn't

What to look for when making the leap to put your company on the net.

By Dan Antonelli

Still don't have your sign company on the Internet? Tired of telling your customers that you don't have a Web site? Or maybe you have a Web site but it's just not working for you. There's no better time than today to revisit the issue of whether or not you should be on the net. But first you need to be aware of what works, and what doesn't, along with what a site can and can't do for your business.

What a site probably won't do for you I think shop owners think that once they get a Web site it will somehow bring in a lot of business on its own. The reality is most sign companies are so geographic-specific that they're not going to do much business outside of their hometown. Unless, of course, you're making a product you ship across the country (i.e., sign blanks, residential signs, etc.). In that instance, the whole country is your market.

But if you're doing local work, you're really only interested in promoting the site locally, which is a very narrow target audience on the Internet. So, your search engine strategy has to be very narrow and region-specific in focus.

What your site should do First and foremost, your site should establish your company as a reputable, professional organization. It should make it easy for potential customers to look through your work and gauge the quality you offer. With that in mind, it should also help eliminate the wrong kind of clients just as it should reel in the right kind of clients.

We've designed several sign-company sites. For most, we were presenting work from higher-end shops that produce outstanding work. To the viewer who is seeking this type of work, it's very obvious that you've found the right company. On the flip side, if you're looking for red lettering on white corrugated plastic, it will be just as obvious that you're in the wrong place.

In practice, this works well, especially when a potential client is on the phone and inquiring about your service. You can point them to the site, and they'll immediately get a sense for what you do. It's also helpful, too, if you get cornered about pricing options. You can have the potential client view the portfolio section of your site and give price ranges for some of the jobs there.

The time you'll save is immeasurable. You'll

Figure 1. Inside the Portfolio for the Sign & Truck Section on www.kandmsigns.com

Figure 2. Thumbnails are presented, that when clicked…

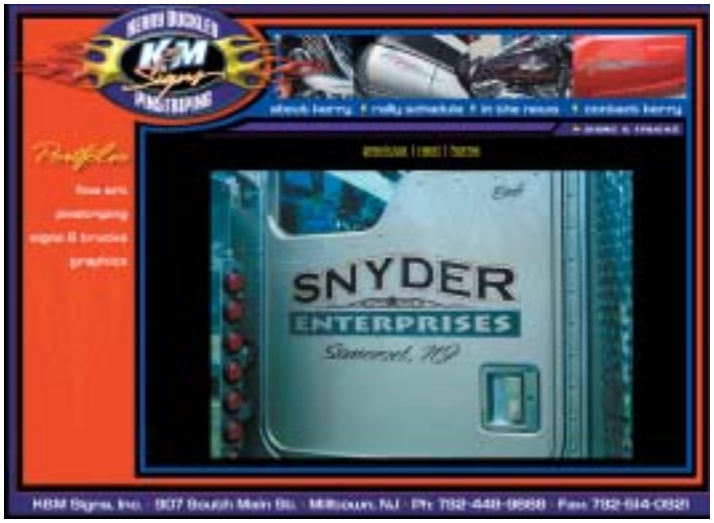

Figure 3. . . . take viewer to larger detailed image. Buttons on top allow for quickly navigating through this section. All other buttons for sections of the site remain visible. There should not be much scrolling on most monitors.

Auto dealer section introduction

Action step leads them to pop-up window

Figure 4. Auto dealer section introduction on www.windowefx.com

A suggested outline for your Web site

Most sites utilize consistent buttons that people expect to see when visiting a site. Here's a list of a few of the regulars.

About: Here's where we can talk a little more in detail about our business, our dedication to the craft, our experience, awards, honors, etc. You may or may not want to include a picture of your shop, shop truck, your employees, or you.

Services: You can have one page that lists all your services, or multiple buttons for each category. You can also employ "mouseouts" for the navigation to simplify and reduce the amount of actual buttons (below).

Portfolio: This is the meat of the site, and where most visitors will spend most of their time.

Client Roster: Adds credibility to the site, and also makes people more comfortable in choosing your firm if they recognize the names of current clients.

Testimonials: Adds credibility, and is also usually a very popular page.

Contact Us: Use a form or E-mail link, and also, if possible, include your phone and E-mail address on every page of the site.

Main navigation also has "mouseout" to simplify the navigation and reduce the number of buttons.

Figure 5. The pop-up window pops up to the left of the page, and will leave original window behind it. Each thumbnail will expand and remain within the popup.

Arrows make navigating through the section a snap.

When you're done viewing this section, click here, and you're right back to the original site.

Figure 6.

weed out the tire-kickers, and bring in the people willing to pay the right money for your work.

What should you include? Your Web site must present your work in a professional manner and make it easy for the user to view your work. So, the site's design should be intuitive, quick loading and follow a hierarchy that makes sense.

Many sign companies attempt to build their own site. While this is admirable in some regards, it's also probably a mistake. The learning curve is steep on Web design. I've recently completed my 80th Web site. I can assure you that my first dozen, while better than most, still weren't very good.

If you want to try it yourself, the tools you need are Macromedia's *Fireworks* and *Dreamweaver*. The tool you don't need is FrontPage, unless you want a very generic look. But if your time is worth as much as it should be, doing your own site is not an effective allocation of your resources.

Showing your portfolio or photo gallery What's shown in your photo gallery is probably the biggest selling point to potential customers. Unfortunately, most sign company Web sites fail miserably in presenting their work in functionally intuitive manner. They make it difficult to quickly view the work. Some sites rely on the user to use the browser *Back* and *Next* buttons, or they don't show thumbnails to make it easy to jump to a particular photo.

There's a reason why we price our Web sites according to the photo counts. It takes a lot of effort to make them function smoothly and intuitively. We have found that there are only two effective approaches to displaying photos—popups within the site navigation (See figures 1-3), or a separate popup window gallery (Figures 4-6).

To Flash or to not Flash We like to include just a little Macromedia *Flash* animation into most of our sign company Web sites. But we usually don't design sites that are completely Flash based. Flash-based sites are not search-engine recognizable, which is one of the main reasons why most clients don't want them. They also can be load-time intensive, which may alienate some visitors.

Other issues related to load time Obviously, the faster your site loads, the better. I've heard roughly only about 30 percent of the Internet-viewing population has high-speed access. The number may be higher for business owners.

Questions for your Web designer Do they understand the nature of your business? With every site we design, regardless of who it's for, we need to fully understand the product and service, and research the best way to market it with the Web site.

■ *Do they have samples of other sites they've done, and are they applicable to my business?* I'm amazed companies hire unqualified designers for their company Web site. Did they do any homework or research on the Web designer before laying good money down? We've done many redesigns for clients who were unhappy with what their previous designer did for them. It's a shame to have to pay for something twice. Do your homework! Make sure your confident in the designer's abilities to communicate your marketing goals effectively.

www.northcoastsignwork.com

www.cranberrysigncraft.com

www.compassdesigninc.net

■ *Do they offer search-engine services?* Will the site be built to be search-engine friendly? For some shops, search-engine work will be an important component of their marketing strategy. For others, it's less an issue depending on the goals of the site. Regardless, each site should be ready to be searchable by the search engine. This includes the inclusion of META tags, alt image tags and keyword phrases that will assist your site in being ranked or picked up by search engines.

■ *Do they offer Web hosting?* Some Web designers offer their own Web-hosting services. The advantage of this is convenience. The disadvantage of this is that it generally will be slightly more expensive than if you got it on your own. But like everything else, sometimes you get what you pay for. Some bargain-basement hosting companies throw your site on slow servers or have nonexistent customer service.

■ *How will they present the portfolio, and how do they scan the photos?* The most important part of your Web site is the manner in which your portfolio is shown. It's also crucial to know if part of the designer's fee includes retouching the photos, sharpening and optimizing them. You also want to verify how the photos will be viewed (thumbnails, blowups or page navigation for each).

■ *The site's up, where's the traffic?* The movie *Field of Dreams* has a great line: "If you build it, they will come." If only that were true with Web sites! If you don't promote the site, no one will come. How do you promote it? Whose job is it to promote it? These are questions for your Web designer. There are really two options for search-engine marketing:

■ *Pay-Per-Click:* This method of search-engine marketing charges you for every click that a user makes from a search engine. You bid on where your listing will rank for each particular search term. The higher you bid, the higher your ranking. Because there are not a lot of people doing this, you can usually bid any where from a nickel to a dime to achieve first-place rankings.

■ *Manual submissions with a Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Company:* These are specialized companies that do nothing else other than optimizing Web sites to achieve higher search-engine rankings. They somehow figure out the algorithms that search engines like Google use to determine a site's relevance, and also aggressively list and submit your site to various search engines. If you're selling nationwide to a wide audience, this is really the way to go.

The downside is that it's very expensive. We hired a firm, Marketing Plus (908-665-4165), to handle the SEO marketing of our own Web site (www.graphicd-signs.com). The results they achieved for our site have been fantastic. The site is pulling in 20-percent new business for us. But our main product line is not signs. We're offering rather non-geographic-specific items, such as logo design, Web design and advertising services.

The bottom line Do your homework, and choose a Web design company very carefully. The image they present of your company may be the first impression a potential customer has of your company. Spend the money and get it done right! Great sites will serve not only as 24/7 sales tool, but a virtual portfolio of your best work. •SC

Dan Antonelli is president and creative director for Graphic D-Signs, Inc., a full-service graphic design firm. He can be reached at 908-835-9000 or you can visit his Web site at www.graphicd-signs.com, which showcases nearly 60 other Web sites his firm has produced. He is also the author of *Logo Design for Small Business*, which is available from *SignCraft* [800-204-0204, www.signcraft.com].

There's more on www.signcraft.com

Click on *Features* to read Dan's article:

■ **Create an affordable, full-color brochure for your shop**, November/December 1998

■ **Creative digital printing can set your shop apart**, July/August 2002

■ and several more of Dan's past articles