

Corporate Web Presence - An Indian Perspective

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Much has been written, rewritten – ad infinitum, about the Internet as a medium of the future. Despite a variety of views being expressed on this subject, almost all analysts agree that the Internet's true power stems from its inherent (two-way) interactive nature. From a company's perspective, the Internet is the single largest (worldwide) community of consumers talking – talking to each other, talking about their various interests, experiences – talking to an organisation/ company or its competition – the list is endless.

Though this consumer-to-consumer conversation is a Global phenomenon, typically Internet users interact with each other in much smaller topic/ interest/ region specific communities. This interaction could be in the form of bulletin boards, newsgroups, chat rooms, user-posted (product) reviews even e-mail distribution lists etc. This ongoing conversation between consumers marks a watershed in consumer empowerment; never before in the history of civilization has information (or disinformation) dissemination been as easy as it is today. A disgruntled consumer can now (potentially) reach out to several thousand (or even several million) other consumers across the globe – spreading the message of his experience with a particular company/ organisation.

This can be either a threat or an opportunity for an organisation. The challenge here is how does one react? Does one follow a policy of studied silence, "We are above reacting to such nonsense"! But if you don't start talking to your customers online, there is a good chance your competition will.

It follows that more than an advertising medium; the Internet lends itself better to being leveraged as a medium for extremely focussed PR initiatives – as a complement to offline advertising/ PR initiatives.

However, on browsing some of the current Indian corporate sites the realization dawns that next to none (in the country) are exploiting the full gamut of opportunities afforded by this interactivity. All the sites visited can, at best, be termed as glorified online brochure-ware.

The questions you must now ask yourself are: As an organisation are you talking to your customers online? A mere website wont cut any ice – a brochure is a one way conversation after all – your organisation should be instead listening to your customers/ potential customers/ influencers and responding to them proactively – what are they saying? What interests them? What doesn't? When someone visits your website, what all are they really looking for – in terms of both information, features, etc.? The biggest online brands were built on pure word of mouth – how easy/ difficult are you making it for visitors to your site to spread out the message about you? Does your corporate site offer anything more than just static information about your organisation? If so why do you think anyone would keep coming back to your site?

One thing that every company must recognise upfront is that, in spite of their best efforts there will be people saying unpleasant things about them. The more successful your organisation the larger will be the number of people talking about you (online) – saying both good and bad things. To test this premise, one has just to do a search on the number of anti-Microsoft sites (and online forums) as compared to a relatively unknown (outside the industry) outfit like Nullsoft.

The beauty of the Internet is that it permits you to create such a forum on your own website, with minimal effort (and expense). What better way to gauge the pulse of your market than to have your customers discussing you (without any supervision) on your home ground? The easy part is providing tools to allow for such online interaction – but without serious internal initiative and offline marketing support creating such an online community – though not impossible – is undoubtedly difficult. Offline initiatives could be as simple as making sure that the URL of your website is on all office stationary, communication that goes outside the organisation, a part of every e-mail sent out from your servers (as a footer to the message) and clearly printed on product packaging.

Building of online communities has come a long way in a few years -- from the days when having a (usually empty) message board meant you were an online community to today when many of the web's biggest players are fostering user interaction with profitable results in mind. There is no doubt that these trends will continue as communities are leveraged to play crucial roles for site-owners -- roles like "marketer", "salesperson", "reviewer", "expert/advisor", and "inspector/policeman". The magic of the next generation of web strategy will be to implement better ways to engage your user community to accomplish your site's long-term vision. Sites should look at building an online community, but it is not pure community play. Rather, an appropriate suite of tools to facilitate collaboration supplements the community.

Developing online communities – **The Advantages**

- Customer interaction and response
- Branding
- Developing lifetime customer value, viral value and offline value.
- Eyeballs

While the target audience may vary from company site to company site depending on the vision the company has for the site, LOB etc. – advantages gained by fostering the development of an online community are applicable across industries.

Fostering the development of online communities on a website is only the first step in making your corporate web presence successful. What is required is a detailed industry-wise analysis along with (relevant) recommendations for each industry segment, prior to any web-based initiative. Failing this, most web initiatives are doomed to be stillborn websites, with little or no appeal for the target audience – several examples of which are online for all to see.

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