

Rule #24 Let your Fingers Do the Walking The Rule of web sites

Back in the 1960's, the phone company developed a marketing campaign that encouraged people to use their product more. "Let your fingers do the walking" became synonymous with picking up the yellow pages and finding a business. People still let their fingers do the walking, but they are more likely to be found on a keyboard than on a dial pad.

Consider the following:

- A new website goes online an average of every three seconds
- More than 64 million travel-related domain names have been registered so far
- The internet is fourth only to electricity, the automobile and television in its influence on daily American life.
- Seventy-five percent of all Americans use the Internet regularly, and sixty-eight percent have immediate access to the web either at home or work.
- New Internet users are growing at a rate of nearly ten percent per month!
- Ninety-four percent of all Internet users plan their travel using the web.
- Website use for travel planning has grown incredibly fast and varies little by age, or Gender. Older Americans use the web for travel planning as often as younger Americans.

This means that the highest potential travelers (those older, retired consumers with the greatest disposable income) can be effectively reached via the Internet. According to one study by Stanford University, Internet users spend nearly 10 percent of their online time researching travel sites.

So, how excited were you when your community's website went live? And now that your town has a website, have you wondered about its purpose? If you have a website just because other communities have one, too, that's not good enough. Many towns say that the website is simply an information source for local residents, businesses, and community leaders. But the real power of the Internet lies in its power to promote.

It's rare to find a community that isn't looking for some form of economic growth: residential, business, industry or tourism. The Internet is the most powerful and cost effective way to market your community,

There are two major challenges with a website: Is it good enough to close the sale? And can your customer even find it?

So how can your area compete on the super highway? Assuming that your community already has something of interest for visitors, there are hundreds of ways to make your site stand out. Here are a few:

- ✓ Make the site informational but not wordy. Research has shown that users are more likely to read web content that is concise and factual. Use bullet points.
- ✓ The site should answer any questions that the visitor may have. They want to know “What is there to do? What does the town look like? How do I get around? Where do I stay? Are there any package deals? Are there special activities for kids, seniors? What’s going on this month?”
- ✓ Think about organizing your site by activity type from a menu that asks, “What do you want to do?”
- ✓ Include testimonials from satisfied visitors – those third party endorsements we talked about earlier in the book.
- ✓ Make your activities guide and other literature available for download as PDF files.
- ✓ To ensure large numbers of people visit your site, establish reciprocal links with other tourism-related websites and register with the most popular search engines.
- ✓ Find a qualified, professional web designer. Go for experienced rather than just local. With the Internet, access to every web designer is at the tip of your fingers.
- ✓ A good website is meant to showcase your best qualities – the things that make you worth a special trip. Be sure to budget properly. \$15,000 - \$20,000 is not too much to spend.
- ✓ Use lots of photography, especially activity shots. Potential tourists want to get as close to visiting your community as they can without actually setting foot on your sidewalks. Photos will draw people in.
- ✓ Purchase key words, often referred to as “pay per click” programs. Eighty percent of Web surfers never go past the first two pages of search results. Pay-per-click can help you be on the first page.
- ✓ Promote experiences, not geography. People are looking for activities and seldom for cities. If your town is the bird watching capital of North Carolina, will they find it if the Google “bird watching North Carolina?”
- ✓ Market experiences by the type of travel (RV, motorcycle, private auto, tour, bus), by activity (history, culinary, gardening, entertainment, culture, events, etc.) and by season.
- ✓ Photos should be optimized for quicker downloading. If you want to display a lot of photos on one page, use thumbnail images that users can click if they want to see a larger size.
- ✓ Develop an e-newsletter that includes upcoming events and special travel savings. Make it easy to subscribe and unsubscribe. This is “permission marketing” not spam and creates top of mind awareness.
- ✓ If your town has the budget, dedicate a person full-time to the web. It’s that important. Keep your site fresh, up to date and ever changing so it doesn’t become a “been there done that” site.

- ✓ Travelers use their computers to book flights and reserve rooms. If your site doesn't offer that e-commerce connection, make sure it provides links to sites that do.

The Internet has become a remarkable tool for people who want to plan their vacations from the comfort of their own homes. Nimble fingers and a ready mouse are all it takes. The Internet has also become a marketing tool for communities to encourage people to get out of their homes and see what is great about this country. The Internet may be a great place to let your fingers do the walking, but a great site will convince visitors to let their feet do the walking through your community.