

Handout 3: How to keep sites fresh

Keeping your site fresh needn't be a difficult task. In fact, it can often be a mostly automatic task, one where you just set it up and let it run. Technology is rarely the barrier to maintaining a fresh site; to put forth a dynamic image to your web customers, you really just need to have a plan. If you plan well, you could very well just pull a trigger and let your site run all year, updating itself. If you don't have the tools or services to let things run on their own, a good plan will still save you time and hassle.

Taking Stock

Consider the humble grocery store. Many items, such as canned goods, may stay on the shelves for months or longer. Fruits and vegetables, on the other hand, require constant re-stocking and disposal of items past their date. Some items may stick around till they are sold; others will be put on sale to bring in customers and, hopefully, sell other items along with them. A grocery store, like most retail operations, will have a plan for stocking, re-stocking, when to have sales and so on.

Again, nothing complex here, but it's worth noting that a website shares many of the same characteristics: Certain items change rarely (like your business name, location and branding); others change periodically (like product additions/removals); and still others change quite frequently (such as specials, news or press releases). Understanding what needs to change and how often it should be updated is the first step in developing a plan for keeping your site fresh.

At the very least, you should review your entire site annually. Here are the major areas of note and how often, ideally, you should freshen them up:

1. Visual branding: Annually – Your logo may not change and your corporate colors may remain the same, but every year you should revisit the look and feel of your website and make sure it's saying what you want it to say. Are you customer service-focused? If so, does the site put customer service information up front?

2. "Static" copy: Annually – By static I really mean the copy or text that changes rarely – "About Us," "Company Information" and others are prime candidates. Because these change so rarely, we often for-

get that first-time visitors to your site often use these informational pages as a key part of their evaluation process. Does your company look professional? Is your ordering information up to date? Make sure you review these pages at least once a year and update if necessary.

3. Policies/Legalese: Annually – Yes, it's a pain, and no, it doesn't really affect the "freshness factor," but while you're looking at all that other static content, make sure you review any privacy policies or legalese you may have on your site. Your attorney can let you know if anything needs to change as the result of current events, such as adding a virus liability clause.

4. "Frequently Asked Questions"/Support: Quarterly – Frequently asked questions, or FAQs, have become de rigeur for web sites because most users understand that they can avoid a phone call or email by checking to see if their questions are answered on an FAQ list. A good FAQ can be just as valuable a resource for your own employees (especially new ones) as it is for your site visitors.

5. Search Engine Tags/Statistics: Quarterly – If you're a hard-core web marketer, you may review your search-engine friendliness weekly or even daily; for the rest of us, search engine metatags and descriptions don't really contribute to superficial "freshness," but they do enable more users to find your site. They should be reviewed, along with your site statistics, at least once every quarter.

6. Basic Product Data: Quarterly – If you are presenting or selling products online, you should review your products quarterly – what's selling, what's stale, what's been discontinued – and update accordingly.

7. Specials: Monthly – Specials, sales and discounts create demand and drive business, and in a market where any given type of promotion has thousands of eligible product ideas, the one presented as the best deal often wins out. Product specials, hot products, featured products and any other method you have of pushing fresh deals out to customers will keep them coming back to the site and, as any web consultant will tell you, keeping those customer "eyeballs" on the site as long as possible is the key to selling successfully online. Best of all, many web service providers and ASPs provide an automated

method to set up specials and featured products and have them run automatically all year long.

8. News/Announcements/Events: Monthly – Keeping your customers abreast of even minor events can be a great way to stay fresh on your site. Do you have a number of customers in manufacturing? Let them know when the next big tradeshow or event is coming up. Holidays approaching? Remind customers of important production deadlines for holiday promo orders. Hire a new hotshot salesperson or moved across town? Let the world know about your success.

How to do all this

First of all, you need to determine what type of website you have. There are two basic types of websites: static and dynamic. A static website serves up pages that are just that – static. These pages will be uploaded by you or your web designer and will not change unless you upload new ones. Static websites are typically used for so-called web “brochures” that simply tell visitors something about your company and services and little more.

Dynamic websites, on the other hand, use a database or similar technology to present dynamic content to visitors. Dynamic content can be anything from the latest seasonal special to information and pricing customized to a particular user. Within the category of dynamic websites, there are two basic subcategories: Dynamic websites that you control, such as one you or your web developer built for you; and dynamic websites that are served up by an application service provider and offer a little or a lot of control over content.

If you have a static website, your freshening techniques are limited to your capability to manually change things. If you know your way around a web page-editing program like Microsoft’s FrontPage or Macromedia’s Dreamweaver, you can make changes to the site as you please – but, more likely, you won’t need to make these changes often because static sites don’t usually have much content to speak of. Alternatively, if an outside designer or web company built your static site, you can have them make those changes for you.

On the other hand, if you choose a service provider or developer that gives you some control over content, freshness becomes a simple matter of periodic

manual and automated updates. Manual updates are quite a bit easier on dynamic sites than on static sites because they typically require nothing more than a web browser to accomplish. So, to change some of that frequently rotating content mentioned last month – like news, announcements or frequently asked questions – you simply log in to the site with your web browser, enter a user name and password, and make your changes right there in the browser’s window.

There are a variety of names for this type of technology, but “Content Management System,” or “CMS” is probably the most commonly used. A good dynamic website will offer some level content management for both this type of periodic update as well as for product information – and product information is where powerful, automated updating of content really makes constant freshness an attainable goal.

Restocking the Shelves

Automatic systems allow you to do some pretty amazing things, such as:

- **Popular Products:** Automatically display the most-viewed or purchased products on your site to show your customers what other visitors are buying. This is a proven e-commerce technique pioneered by companies like Amazon.com that is now available to just about anyone.
- **Specials:** A top-notch content management system lets you set up your specials ahead of time and runs them automatically based on start and stop dates. Want your sports-related products to go on sale right before summer? Set up the start and stop dates for the specials on those products and they’ll pop up when you want them to, and go away at the end of the season
- **Featured Products:** Have a few products you’d like to push? A “featured” or “hot” products tool lets you designate existing products to feature on the homepage, in search listings, or anywhere you want to push users toward a particular product.
- **Search engine tags:** Ideally, the meta tags, title tags and other information that identifies your site to search engines will either be editable in some form or will be generated automatically from the site’s database.