

## **Promoting your Web Site**

*By Joe Dysart*

OK, So you have a great Web site. But who in the world knows about it? While Web fever has many rental-purchase organizations examining whether or not to commit to cyberspace, Internet marketing consultants warn that without proper marketing and promotion, Web sites can quickly become cyber elephants.

Chad Mitchell, advertising manager and buyer for Virginia-based Kelly Rentals, was responsible for creating his company's Web site. "We felt like we were going to have to do it sooner or later," says Mitchell. "We currently have a product order form that potential customers can submit, but we haven't experienced a whole lot of traffic yet." Mitchell says that the first big change his company will make to the Web site will be to feature more products.

Slowly but surely, rental-purchase companies are creating an online presence, if only to have the company name out there and for when current and potential customers become more Internet savvy. It would benefit those rental dealers with Internet sites or those who are considering a Web site to learn a few tricks of the trade in creating and engaging online traffic.

The now-cliche Web maxim, 'If you build it they will come,' has lulled many online marketers into a false sense of opportunity. The truth is that Web site traffic building has its own set of PR needs and requires its own system of aggressive, attention-getting tactics" says Charles Sayers, an Internet marketing consultant based in Acworth, GA.

Once implemented, these tactics have the potential to produce significant new trade for rental-purchase businesses. The reason: 74 percent of Internet users shopped online this past Christmas selling season, according to Media Metrix (see sidebar for Web addresses), an Internet marketing research firm. And while many traditional rent-to-own customers do not have PCs at home, many have access to computers at work, school and at local libraries. Moreover, Internet marketers see the Web as marketing tool becoming even more effective for business as cell phones and inexpensive personal digital assistant devices begin offering Web access. Should you decide to make the plunge, Internet consultants advise you to take advantage as many of the following Web site marketing and promotion strategies as possible:

Consider a professional search-engine-listing firm. Seasoned Web users turn to search engines like Yahoo! and Excite to help them find specific information on the Net quickly. Essentially, they simply type in a subject area and the search engine brings back "links" that they can "click on" for further information.

Given the great power these search engines have to steer thousands of Net cruisers to specific sites, it should come as no surprise that a number of Web-savvy firms have cropped up to help firms be among the first "links" the search engines return to information seekers. Many of these service providers are profiled on SearchEngineWatch.

Elite Rent-To-Own, based in Eugene, OR, is apparently no stranger to this listing strategy. When the keywords "rent-to-own" were entered into Yahoo!, its site was the first link to be listed. That kind of visibility does not happen accidentally. Another winner in the listing wars was Budget Rental Centers, based in Victoria, British Columbia. Its site was first up when the same keywords were entered into AllTheWeb, another popular search engine.

Another option is to use a software program like Web Site Traffic Builder, by Draper, UT-based Intelliquis. Traffic Builder automatically registers your site with more than 900 Internet search engines and will automatically put your business in the appropriate category for each search engine. Plus, you can use the software to check your site's position on the Net's eight most popular search engines. A similar program, WebPosition Gold, by FirstPlace Software, focuses on getting your site placed high up on the Web's top search engines.

Rent or buy a consumer e-mail list. This is probably one of the easiest - although maybe one of the most expensive - ways to promote a Web site and company services on the Web. Essentially, firms using this technique rent exposure in an e-mail customer distribution list of a firm that is already established on the Web. Often, the firm owning the list recommends via e-mail that its customers visit the site of the list renter and sometimes includes a discount coupon for a goods or services at the list renter's site.

Create "hook" pages. Many a site has drawn in Net cruisers by creating informational pages that in turn offer links to a commercial site, according to Craig Settles, a senior strategist for Berkeley, CA-based Successful Marketing Strategists and author of *Cybermarketing: Essentials for Success*. An information page thoroughly detailing the benefits of rent-to-own agreements, for example, would serve as a good "hook" to a commercial site specializing in the same service.

Link 'til you drop. Probably the easiest, least expensive and most effective way to promote a site is to link your page with every other noncompetitive page on the Internet that shares the same interest. That includes links with trading partners, local businesses and organizations and your local chamber of commerce.

Enter as many Web site contests as possible. Web sites that have the mettle should attempt to get their new (or improved) site judged by the many "cool site of the day," week, etc. judging services. Sites that are judged worthy of an award are given the equivalent of a graphic blue ribbon that can be posted on the winning site. And the awarding service also provides a free link to the winning page from its own home page - a perk that can literally generate thousands of visits to a new Web site, according to Sayers. Adds Jim Wilson, the Webmaster behind Virtual Promote and a samurai-class Web marketer, "Keep in mind that most people who will be surfing to your Web site don't know the relative difficulty (or ease) of earning different awards. All they see is that some people thought your site was good enough to win an award. Go ahead. Apply for everything."

Offer coupons. This is another old-economy bricks-and-mortar solution that works just as well - if not better - on the Web. Coupons can be offered easily online for easy printout, or periodically delivered directly to the visitors' e-mail boxes. The advantage of e-mail delivery is that the business can more easily build a relationship with customers over time, since they do not have to make any effort to search for the coupons. Colortyme Rent To Own, based in Alice, TX, offers a \$25 off coupon at its site. Rent-2-Own, offers a generous two months free rent coupon at its site. And A to Z Rentals, based in Jasper, AL, offers a \$10 off coupon at its site.

Start your own contest. Another tried-and-true traffic generator in the bricks-and-mortar world, online contests do the same for Web sites - as well as glean valuable demographic data about site visitors. Rent-to-own businesses that offer coupons could also offer the chance to win more generous awards for Web visitors willing to share a little information about them on an interactive form.

Establish a virtual press center. Probably one of the most overlooked opportunities on the

Web is the opportunity to establish a virtual press center on a site. Increasingly, journalists are turning to the Internet and the Web to search for stories and develop new ideas, and there is no reason why any company with a Web site should pass up an opportunity for free media exposure, says Settles. RentWay, based in Erie, PA, embraces the virtual press room concept in earnest. In addition to press releases online, it also offers downloadable audio/video Webcasts of key company news events. Of course, being a publicly traded company such as RentWay, having a Web site press room is almost mandatory these days.

Become an information clearinghouse. Web sites featuring in-depth information resources are magnets for potential customers. A good start, for example, is to simply offer as many links as possible to Web sites offering information related to the rent-to-own industry. Alternatively, you may want to create a series of in-depth backgrounders on your own approach to rent-to-own.

Offer a branded news ticker. This is probably one of the more innovative of Web site promotion strategies being used on the Web today. Currently, a number of news organizations offer free, Web-based news feeds to any Web site interested in running those feeds. Individual.com, for example, offers free news feeds to Web sites.

Get posted in Web directories. In an effort to make Web cruising a little easier, a number of businesses have packaged themselves in easy-to-use directories to help get to their sites more quickly. Locatel, based in Montreal, Canada, links to The Montreal Page, an online directory of the Canadian city's goods and services.

Add a chat room. This is the application that catapulted America Online to the premier spot among Internet service providers. Essentially, it's a place where 30 or so people can "congregate," and exchange live text messages with one another over the Net. The operative word here is "live." In a chat room, everyone gets to read and respond to anything that anyone else feels inspired to write on the spot. For more information, type the keywords "chat room software" into any popular search engine.

Consider banner ads. Many Web sites are promoted by brief flourishes of color and text - banner ads - that float across the screen while Net cruisers are visiting related Web sites. "During the past year, many services have sprung up to help Webmasters find other sites to exchange banner advertising," says Virtual Promote's Wilson. You can find out more about banner ads by visiting SmartClicks, Banner Swap and Trade Banners.

Start a newsletter. Interesting and informative company newsletters are a time-honored way to establish an ongoing relationship with current and prospective customers. Tech Rentals, based in Ringwood, Victoria, Australia, puts a Web spin on the newsletter with a sign-up online for e-mail alerts. Each alert offers news of special promotions and sales regularly offered by the RTO firm. Full-O-Pep American Rental Co., based in Bloomington, IN, has a similar e-mail alert sign-up at its site.

Add a send-this-page option. A new twist on one of the most reliable forms of advertising - word-of-mouth - send-this-page options enable site visitors to send your home page, or any other site page for that matter, to a friend with a few mouse-clicks.

Offer free classified ads. A bread-and-butter advertising staple of every newspaper in America, classified ads are also a big hit on the Net. Many businesses offer classified domains as a free service, just to draw more traffic to their sites. A rent-to-own business, for example, might want to offer a free "personals" ad service.

Add a "Recommend this site to a friend" button. The old maxim "Nothing is more valuable than word-of-mouth promotion" never rang truer in cyberspace. Get your Web designer to add a "Recommend this site" button. By clicking on the button, the visitor can dash off a quick "heads-up" about the site to a friend, which is then automatically forwarded to the friend's e-mail address.

Make your site truly global. While most of us are comfortable bandying about catch phrases like "international marketplace" and "global economy," only a handful of sites on the Web are actually truly global in reach. The reason: few businesses have bothered to sport more than their own language on their sites. If your rent-to-own business is in an ethnically diverse community, you may want to reach out to as many cultures as possible. Simply offering your Web site in a number of languages - say Spanish and Chinese, for example - is a good start. You also may want to hire on a localization consultant to help you further customize your site for specific cultures. For more info on localizers, visit Silicon Valley Localization Forum, hosted by TGP Consulting, based in Palo Alto, CA.

Concludes Sayers, "Combining these tactics with a relentless persistence to build your site's traffic will virtually guarantee that within a few short weeks, your access counters [a software tool used to measure visits to a Web site] will start spinning like the gallon indicator on a 1950s gas pump."

Joe Dysart is an Internet speaker and business consultant based in Thousand Oaks, CA, 805/379-3673, [joedysart@digitalubiquity.com](mailto:joedysart@digitalubiquity.com), [www.digitalubiquity.com](http://www.digitalubiquity.com).