

A View From the Back of the Bus

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Product Marketing and the World Wide Web

In my view from the back of the bus, I have noted that very few product manufacturers are very effective in their use of the world wide web. Most construction product manufacturers treat their websites as electronic catalogs and product advertisements. It is interesting to note that the quality of electronic materials are still just as poor as they were in the paper version. The usability of most sites is mediocre at best and painful on average. Experience shows that the simple, easy to navigate sites are far more effective than the highly decorated, multiple framed nightmares that seem to dominate the web. Take another look at your website and consider the following ideas and suggestions gleaned from a number of web experts and power users.

Colin Gilboy PE, of the specified product internet portal 4specs.com (www.4specs.com) recently commented that websites have *"...too many junk graphics - graphics that do not help the usability of the website. Each image takes time and slows down the display of your website."* If your website takes more than a few seconds to load the home page or has some useless flash animation you are losing visitors. Experience suggests that most manufacturers have their advertising/marketing people design their websites. So, as in advertising and slick marketing pieces, the web is full of graphics and animation and painfully short of content and useable knowledge.

Usability and Understanding your Audience

Colin suggests that a *"...website needs to be targeted to a working construction professional."* Website must immediately connect with users and clearly indicate what information is available and how to access it. Statistically, most visitors to websites will spend between 30 and 60 seconds trying to navigate a website and then leave when they can't find information to solve their problems. If I can't get to the product information and specifications in 10 seconds and a maximum of 3 clicks, I go to the competition. An easy-to-use site is a tremendous competitive advantage, particularly in terms of getting product specified and keeping specifiers coming back to the site.

Content and Information

A website is not an electronic catalog. It is a database of knowledge about industry practice, standards, expertise, products, and how to use them appropriately. The ability to combine graphics, technical data, and specifications in a simple to use format is the most effective marketing use of the internet. A website should contain everything necessary to understand, design, and specify an industry standard application of the product or assembly. Websites that focus on features and benefits and competitive disinformation rarely get return visits. As Colin says, *"Your website should provide the information a designer needs to select and design using your products. ALL OF IT. Don't worry, your competitors already have your UL test reports and other proprietary information, so make that information available to the architect. You have copies of their information, don't you? So make it easy for potential users to access that information as well."* The minute a specifier leaves the site to find a critical piece of information on another site, especially information that could have been provided, the site has failed.

Here is a checklist from 4specs.com on what design professionals want to find on a website [my comments in brackets]:

- G Product Description: [Provide use and application, not features and benefits]
- G General Product Information, including basic uses, limitations, sizes and grades
- G Product Selection Guide [Some type of competitive selection matrix is a fabulous asset]
- G Photographs: [use thumbnails to minimize loading time]
- G Technical Data: [real data not marketing hype, eliminate features and benefits, in PDF]
- G Product Data Sheets: [use SpecData[®] 10-part format or something similar, in PDF]
- G Finishes and color selection guide [Clearly indicate standard and up-charge colors]
- G FAQ - Frequently Asked Questions

- G Competitive Analysis [ignore your attorneys, this is the most useful info of all]
- G 3-part Specification: [provide specs in Word, WordPerfect, RTF]
- G CAD Details: [make sure details can be viewed on line and downloaded]
- G Product Submittal Sheets (in a PDF format to be printed and submitted by the contractor)
- G Code Approvals - ICBO, NER, BOCA
- G Test Reports - UL, Omega Point, etc. [provide reports in PDF format]
- G Case Studies [provide in PDF, these can be great stand alone marketing pieces]
- G MSDS Sheets [in PDF]
- G Installation Instructions [in PDF]
- G Maintenance Instructions [in PDF]
- G Warranty [Provide full details and short version for specs]
- G Product Availability: [focus on lead time issues if applicable]

10 Reasons for Website Marketing Failures

Consider Larry J. Boardman, President, Electronic Marketing, Inc.'s (www.electronicmktg.com) list of reasons why websites fail to produce results [my comments in brackets]:

10. *Information was outdated.* [seems utterly bizarre, considering how easy it is to keep electronic information up-to-date, current majority of sites have materials and standards that are significantly out of date]
9. *Lack of dedicated and applicable domain name.* [simple is best and easy to remember]
8. *Too little information given.* [just enough info to indicate it is a useable product but not enough to specify it correctly at midnight Saturday, you lose]
7. *Too much information presented.* [takes incredible amount of time to edit the marketing trash and disinformation out of the "so-called" specification to make it usable]
6. *Too much graphic overhead.* [slow sites get exited quickly]
5. *No links to or from other associated sites.* [ask what it means when the competition's website becomes the portal to industry information because your site doesn't]
4. *Not designed to appeal to the proper prospect profile.* [always amazes that marketing types do this to themselves. I have visited numerous sites that clearly have no idea who is visiting their sites. I get the biggest laugh out of sites that have contractor side and an architect side. The contractor side has the usable information on fabrication and installation, limitations, and design techniques. The architect side has nothing but foolishness about features and benefits, colors, and "aesthetics" whatever the heck that is. In reality contractors are far more interested in features and benefits and architects would dearly love to know how to design appropriately with the product]
3. *Having no direct response tool or using e-mail only.* [do not force visitors to email you, use a simple direct response box and you will be amazed at the communication you will receive]
2. *Can't be found using search engines with applicable key words.* [Search engines are the second place I go if 4spec.com doesn't have a site reference]
1. *Lack of ongoing pro-active professional marketing and promotion.* [when was the last time you sent a 2 line email to your architects list inviting them to your site, with a hotlink, of course]

It is long past time to make the move from paper product format to electronic product format, databased on the world wide web. However, that is only the beginning. It is imperative that information presented on the web be updated daily, industry standard data that can be easily transformed into project specifications. Certainly, list the product's features and benefits, as meaningless as they are, since that seems to keep the marketing department happy. If you want to be specified, provide industry standard product data for developing project specifications. Remember, marketing is about solutions, never about products.

Product data, guide specifications, data sheets, and the like should be provided in Adobe Acrobat PDFs, MS Word, WordPerfect, RTF at a minimum. It is also very useful to be able to view the documents on line as HTML files. Ease of data access and usefulness are the hallmarks of successful product websites. That's my view from the back of the bus, come on aboard and let me hear from you.

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