



A CEO'S CHECKLIST FOR COMPANY WEBSITE PERFORMANCE



SYNOPSIS



IS OUR WEBSITE EFFECTIVE FOR GENERATING NEW BUSINESS?



DOES OUR SITE ADVANCE OUR STRATEGIC GOALS?



HAS OUR SITE BEEN BUILT PROPERLY? DOES IT ADHERE TO INDUSTRY BEST PRACTICES?



WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN EVALUATING THE PERFORMANCE OF OUR SITE?

THIS INTELLIGENCE BRIEF WILL HELP YOU ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS AND MAKE YOU MORE COMFORTABLE LEADING YOUR TEAM THROUGH A COMPLETE EVALUATION OF YOUR COMPANY'S WEBSITE.



STRAIGHT NORTH INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

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- 2. Capturing the costs.** What is your site actually costing you? Many firms have no idea. This section identifies all the hard and soft costs that go into your site's ongoing development and maintenance.
- 3. Capturing the return.** What is your site contributing to the bottom line? Again, many firms are not too sure. This section identifies the types of "hard" and "soft" returns to consider, and the various ways to measure them.
- 4. Programming.** Was your site built on the right platform? Does it function properly? Are you using the right hosting service? This section reviews the key technical factors that determine whether your site can carry the load or needs structural support before it crashes.
- 5. Design.** Does your site adhere to best practices for design? Does it arouse the curiosity of visitors? This section discusses the key design factors that determine whether your site is ready for a walk down the runway or one that makes visitors run away.
- 6. Content.** If visitors read the content on your site, are they more likely to do business with you, or less? This section discusses the key content factors that determine whether your site builds connectivity or confusion with prospects and customers.
- 7. Usability.** Do users have a positive experience when they visit your site? This section discusses the key usability factors, such as navigation and page loading time, that determine whether your site gets rave reviews from customers and prospects, or drives them away.
- 8. SEO.** Search engine optimization is usually of critical importance, since it's what makes your products and services visible to people on Google and Bing when they need them. This section discusses the onsite SEO factors that determine whether your site earns strong positioning on Google or is lost in space.
- 9. Conversion.** Does your site help customers and prospects take the next step in the business relationship? This is the key to extracting value from a site, and yet the one most firms fumble with. This section discusses the site conversion elements that determine whether your site can reel in leads or is dead in the water.
- 10. Going Forward.** Next steps for improving your site.



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1: Strategy

Does your site have a clear purpose? Are your site's objectives being pursued systematically, haphazardly, or not at all? This section explains the types of websites used in business, and the most important components of each.

A great many business sites begin with a few simple pages to “get our name out there,” and over time become vast dumping grounds for information. Telltale signs your site has been lacking in strategic development:

- Non-intuitive, pieced-together navigation
- A site design that looks outdated
- Inconsistency in page layouts and imagery
- A News section without recently added content
- Outdated or incomplete information
- An overall focus on your firm rather than customers
- A smattering of unrelated products or services being offered for sale
- “Contact us” requests haphazardly placed around the site

For effective Internet marketing, a company site must be purposeful. There are three common types of business sites, with very different strategic objectives:

Billboard websites can be thought of as online sales brochures. They are used to establish a firm's credentials, provide an overview of products and services, and put forth a high-level value proposition. Billboard sites tend to have relatively little content and a strong emphasis on design. They are used to build identity and credibility.

Lead generation websites take the billboard model a step further by creating *conversion paths*, whereby customers and prospects can take the next step in the business relationship by requesting a quote, demo, information, or some other action. Lead generation sites are more complex in terms of programming (because we now have interaction and require lead tracking), content, and design.

E-commerce websites are online stores. They are extremely complex in terms of programming, content, and design, and require a great deal of back-end maintenance and support. They are used by firms that intend to establish or maintain an online revenue stream as part of — or all of — their business model.



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The **strategic environment** for each type of site generally runs along the following lines:

Billboard Sites

- Little or no ongoing marketing budget to drive traffic and leads
- Limited resources to consistently build new content and site features
- Little or no interest in developing the Internet channel long-term
- A strong need to appear credible to customers and prospects that already know the firm
- Customer base not viewed as being active online
- Other effective marketing programs currently underway

Lead Generation Sites

- Adequate ongoing marketing budget to drive traffic and leads
- Adequate in-house or agency resources to consistently build new content and site features
- Serious interest in expanding brand awareness and market reach
- Customer base that actively researches potential purchases online
- Currently conducting other marketing activities, such as social media or email marketing, that are complementary
- Perfect fit for B2B, but also useful for consumer businesses where e-commerce doesn't fit

E-commerce Sites

- Large ongoing marketing budget to drive traffic, leads, sales; and to conduct merchandising and testing activities
- Considerable in-house or agency resources to build new site content and features
- Dependency on the Internet channel for revenue and growth
- Customer base that actively purchases online
- Most common in consumer businesses, but growing in popularity in the B2B sector



Leadership Insight: It's tempting to hedge strategic bets by mixing and matching elements of each type of site. This seldom works, since best practices differ greatly from one type to another.



2: Capturing the Costs

What is your site actually costing you? Many firms have no idea. This section identifies all the hard and soft costs that go into your site's ongoing development and maintenance.

With good communication among marketing, IT, and finance, a firm should be able to calculate the cost of its website(s) with ease. Doing so becomes extremely important when a firm commits to a lead-generation or e-commerce strategy, since ROI will be a major factor when establishing budgets and marketing strategies. Costs that must be captured:

- **Hosting** — If internal, measured by time; if external, by price.
- **Site maintenance** — If internal, measured by time; if external, by price. Maintenance includes installing upgrades, troubleshooting problems, etc.
- **Design** — This includes fees for stock images, as well as in-house or agency design work.
- **Content** — In-house measured by time, agency by price.
- **Testing** — Lead generation and e-commerce sites often involve testing different designs and messages. These activities involve programming, design, and administrative time.
- **Strategy** — Account for the time required to create a content plan, redesign, site testing, and new site features.
- **Analytics** — This includes time spent or fees paid to collect and track leads, and to review and interpret site usage statistics.
- **Miscellaneous costs** — This includes things such as domain registrations, training certifications, legal department reviews of content, etc.



Leadership Insight: Most companies are great at thinking up and implementing new marketing ideas, but not so great at following through and determining how well or poorly they are doing. The marketing team must be accountable for results, or programs will spin out of control very rapidly.



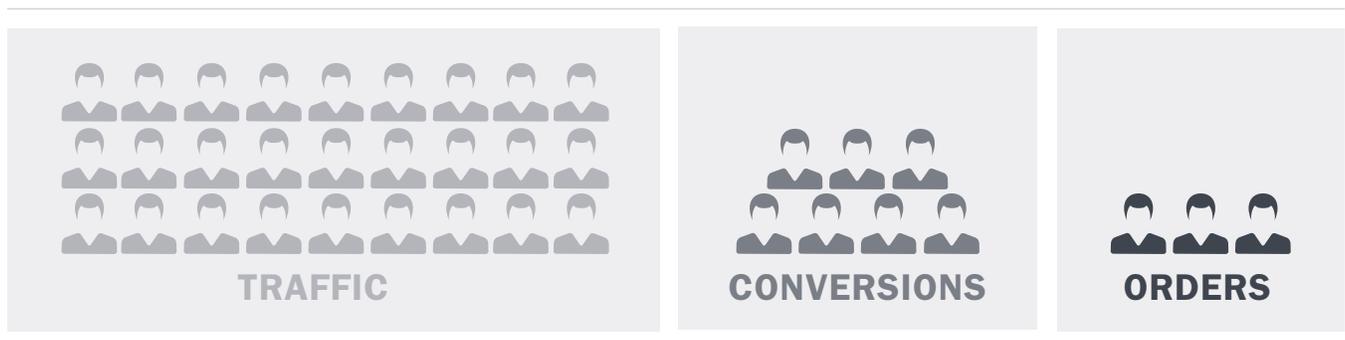
3: Capturing the Return

What is your site contributing to the bottom line? Again, many firms are not too sure. This section identifies the types of “hard” and “soft” returns to consider, and the various ways to measure them.

Whereas capturing site costs is a straightforward process, determining the return may be quite challenging.

Hard Returns

Hard returns are direct results that can be measured with some degree of precision. Here are the three types of hard returns of greatest importance:



- 1. Traffic.** Site traffic is more than just the number of visitors coming to the site. It is also the measurement of how many site pages are viewed, how long visitors stay on the site, and which pages of the site are most popular. Traffic has an impact on conversions (more traffic = more conversion opportunities) and also positively affects search engine visibility on Google and Bing. Google Analytics or other back-end systems are capable of collecting extremely complex site usage information.
- 2. Conversions.** Conversions is the measurement of how many customers fill out forms or phone the firm as a result of visiting the company site. To capture this data, lead tracking must be properly set up on the site.
- 3. Orders.** Order tracking can be quite simple or highly detailed, depending on the needs of the firm and the capabilities of its internal systems. At a minimum, it's imperative to capture online revenues and distinguish new from repeat business.



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Soft Returns

A site's value extends far beyond its hard returns; in many cases, the "soft benefits" are considered more valuable than direct leads and even orders. The difficulty is how to measure soft returns, and how much weight to give the measurements. Here are three of the most commonly sought soft returns:



1. Thought leadership. Many businesses want to be considered a leader in their niche, as it builds credibility and customer confidence — key components of business acquisition and retention. Thought leadership can be measured by the amount of time visitors spend on particular pages of the site, social media mentions of the firm, social media links to content on the firm's site or (more frequently) blog, and similar activities. These metrics also apply to brand awareness.



2. Brand awareness. Thanks to search engines, prospects can discover your business at the exact time they are looking for your products and services. Brand awareness can be measured by traffic. Keep in mind that it is not the site itself but *the marketing of the site*, through search engine optimization, social media, etc., that drives visitors there.



3. Market expansion. Working online, a local business can cast a net regionally, nationally, or even globally: The opportunities for dynamic growth are tremendous. Tracking enables a firm to identify the source of its site leads and understand how activity is progressing in various geographies. In addition, site content can be created to support paid search campaigns and other online or offline geo-targeted marketing activities.



Leadership Insight: Before committing resources to a site strategy, it's vital to assess the importance of these hard and soft returns as a team, and gain internal agreement on their value. Otherwise, a firm will continually second guess the marketing plan and resist site development that may be critical to success.



4: Programming

Was your site built on the right platform? Is it functioning properly? Are you using the right hosting service? This section reviews the key technical factors that determine whether your site can carry the load or needs structural support before it crashes.

A firm's marketing ambitions can exceed its technical capabilities, resulting in unexpected and expensive costs to upgrade a site's back-end functionality. Three key areas to evaluate:

- 1. Search engine optimization (SEO).** Antiquated platforms and improperly constructed sites may not be capable of supporting effective SEO campaigns. In some cases, before proceeding with SEO, a site must be completely rebuilt — a process that can take several months and a mid-five figure budget. It is essential to evaluate site capabilities before committing to an SEO program.
- 2. Hosting performance.** Websites can outgrow a hosting firm as they attract more traffic and become more complex. If the hosting firm cannot handle the workload, the result is excessive downtime, slow page loading time, and difficulty and delays in making upgrades and site changes. These problems have a large impact on customer satisfaction, order placement, lead generation, and even SEO — in addition to driving up costs.
- 3. Integration and updates.** A business site, especially one with a blog, is no longer a standalone marketing tool; rather, it must be integrated with things as diverse as Twitter and EDI systems and be capable of being updated for new content and testing at a moment's notice. Generally, a CMS (content management system) works better in this regard than a proprietary platform or something homegrown.



Leadership Insight: Few things change faster than web technology. Meet with the IT and marketing teams quarterly or even more frequently to ensure that marketing programs and goals are moving forward in harmony with your business technology.



5: Design

Does your site adhere to best practices for design? Does it arouse the curiosity of visitors? This section discusses the key design factors that determine whether your site is ready for a walk down the runway or one that makes visitors run away.

Poor site design makes it difficult for visitors to find what they need, creates a poor impression of your brand, drives visitors away, and can also negatively impact SEO. Best practices for web design are extensive and complex, but these issues are crucial:



- **Qualifications.** Does your design team, whether in-house or agency, have expertise and experience in web design? It is a much different discipline than print design.



- **Imagery.** Does your site use tired stock images that cheapen your image? Do your custom photos and graphic images have sufficiently high resolution and a professional look?



- **Layout.** Are key areas of your site easy to find? Are conversion elements (such as “request a quote?”) prominently placed? Does the overall feel of the site look cluttered, or is it easy on the eye?



- **SEO-friendly.** Google cannot read, or has a hard time reading, content written in Flash or embedded in images. Sites that rely heavily on these things can be virtually invisible to search engines.



Leadership Insight: Like technology, web design best practices change rapidly. If a site hasn't been updated in a few years, it will look outdated. Don't underestimate the impact of site design on branding and lead generation.



6: Content

If visitors read the content on your site, will they be more likely to do business with you, or less? This section discusses the key content factors that determine whether your site builds connectivity or confusion with prospects and customers.

If a firm is serious about branding and lead generation, it will devote as much time and attention to site content as it does to design — possibly more. These are the key attributes of effective site content:

- **Customer-focused.** Visitors want to know how a firm can solve their problems, rather than reading endlessly about a firm's capabilities and achievements.
- **Conversational.** As the web has become more social, people respond better to an informal writing style.
- **Jargon-free.** Highly technical content peppered with industry phrases runs a high risk of confusing or even alienating visitors. Unless you are very sure of your audience's preferences, it's best to avoid this style.
- **Meaningful.** Effective content says something that is useful to customers and prospects. Vacuous, generic sales copy cheapens a firm's image and makes no impact on the visitor.
- **Credible.** A lack of meaningful content is often caused by a reliance on outside writers who are unfamiliar with the firm's business. For B2B in particular, content that betrays a lack of understanding can cripple lead generation efforts. Overcome this problem by using in-house writers or carefully reviewing and editing agency content.
- **Direct and properly organized.** For web copy, key points should appear in headlines and at the beginning of the page, much like in a newspaper. Details and finer points should follow lower on the page, or on a separate page lower in hierarchy. The company site is no place for subtlety.
- **Uses best practices for typography.** Effective web content keeps paragraphs short, uses bullet points and numbered lists, uses italics sparingly, and adds bold fonts strategically. These and related practices make content scannable, readable, and comprehensible.



Leadership Insight: Producing content to the standards listed above requires a good deal of expertise that most firms don't have at their fingertips. A careful assessment of writing resources should be undertaken before committing to any expansion of the company site or supporting marketing programs.



7: Usability

Do users have a positive experience when they visit your site? This section discusses the key usability factors, such as navigation and page loading time, that determine whether your site gets rave reviews from customers and prospects, or drives them away.

Some usability issues have already been touched on in our discussion of programming, design, and content. A productive site *must* create a positive user experience, and yet frequently, usability issues are addressed haphazardly or ignored. Key usability issues include:

- **Navigation.** Information on a site must be quickly *findable* and easily *browsable*. Complex sites, or ones that have been built out in the absence of a strategic plan, must pay particular attention to keeping their navigation clean, complete, and intuitive.
- **Page loading time.** Few things are more frustrating to visitors than a page that won't load. This is such an important issue that Google now penalizes sites with excessively slow loading times.
- **Forms.** Contact forms and other forms on the site should be easy to complete and not require visitors to provide any more information than necessary or commensurate with the value they are receiving in return. For instance, a simple contact form with 10 required fields will turn off most users, but the same requirements to place a first-time order probably won't.
- **The little things.** Horrible user experience is frequently death by a thousand cuts. Even if the large issues mentioned above are handled well, small issues can undermine these efforts. Common user frustrations include videos that launch automatically when the page loads, fonts that are too small, light text on a light background, underlined text that isn't a link, cluttered page layouts, error pages, etc., etc., etc.



Leadership Insight: Web usability is a marketing discipline unto itself. A firm may gain a strong competitive advantage by bringing a usability specialist into the mix for all site development and associated marketing activities.



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8: SEO

Search engine optimization is usually of critical importance, since it's what makes your products and services visible to people on Google and Bing when they need them. This section discusses the onsite SEO factors that determine whether your site earns strong positioning on Google or is lost in space.



Earlier, we discussed the importance of SEO-friendly site development. But what exactly are the requirements? Fortunately, this list is easy to define because Google *tells* firms how to earn high visibility. The onsite factors of greatest importance are:

- **Meta title tags.** Meta information does not appear on the actual web page, but rather in the programming code behind it. The title tag tells Google exactly what each page of content is about, and should contain important keywords.
- **Page loading time.** Already discussed, this ranking factor can be adversely affected by poor design, programming, or hosting.
- **Content.** Google is getting extremely sophisticated in identifying useful, credible content and matching it to relevant searches.
- **Internal linking.** Proper linking of internal site pages tells Google how content is interrelated, and the relative importance of various pages. When site pages are not properly linked — or not linked at all — Google becomes confused and, as a result, does not rank site pages very highly.
- **Usage data.** Traffic, the length of time users stay on a site, and other factors have an impact on how well a page is ranked.

One of the most important *offsite* SEO activities — arguably the most important SEO activity of all — is link acquisition. To learn more, [read our recent *Intelligence Briefing*, “SEO for the CEO”](#).



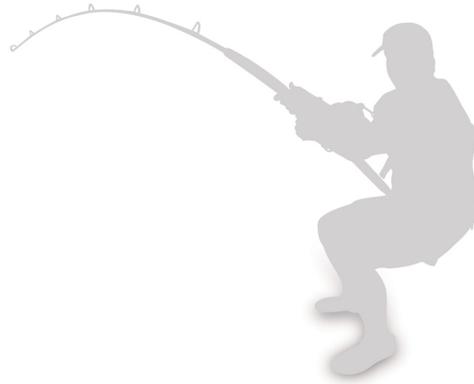
Leadership Insight: Not to sound like a broken record, but SEO best practices are another marketing activity where change comes at lightening speed. SEO-savvy firms review strategy and tactics quarterly, if not monthly.



9: Conversion

Does your site help customers and prospects take the next step in the business relationship? This is the key to extracting value from a site, and yet the one most firms fumble with. This section discusses the site conversion elements that determine whether your site can reel in leads or is dead in the water.

Saving the best for last, it's time to consider the supreme importance of **conversion optimization**. Sites that stumble into a lead generation or e-commerce strategy frequently overlook it, making an otherwise well-constructed site a chronic underperformer. However, when a firm executes a strong conversion strategy, its site drastically outperforms competitors that don't. Key elements of a winning conversion strategy:



- **Intuitive, easy to complete, and persuasive forms.** Whatever the offer is — a free download, proposal request, enter a contest — visitors should be able to almost instantly find the form, grasp it, and be motivated to submit it. The science behind achieving this is immense ... as are the rewards.
- **Offers for different stages of the buying cycle.** Visitors who are window shopping are attracted to a free download, whereas visitors ready to buy may want to request a quote or to meet with a sales representative. Since people coming to a site are all over the buying cycle board, appealing to each type is imperative.
- **Offers appear in the right places.** An offer for a free consultation makes sense on a Product page, but probably not on a Careers page. For an e-commerce site, displaying related products on each Product page is highly effective. Site offers must have appropriate context and timing.
- **Testing.** Without ongoing tests, conversion effectiveness stagnates. Testing can be as big as testing completely different offers, or as granular as testing different colors for the “Submit” buttons.



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- **Tracking.** As touched on before, tracking leads is arguably as important as having offers in the first place. Knowing the origin of the lead — search engine, e-newsletter, etc. — enables a firm to continuously refine its ongoing marketing programs.
- **Credibility.** People are reluctant to interact with, much less do business with, an unknown or unproven entity. To inspire confidence, a site should have credibility elements, which include things such as certification badges, testimonials from recognizable customers, financial information, photos and bios of company leaders, and links to press releases. If nothing else, this Intelligence Brief should make it clear that there is more to a standout company site than meets the eye



Leadership Insight: If your company site relies primarily or exclusively on vague “contact us” conversion messages, it is almost certainly underperforming. Protect your investment by asking the marketing team to develop a detailed conversion strategy.

10: Going Forward

Next steps for improving your site.

If nothing else, this Intelligence Brief should make it clear that there is more to a standout company site than meets the eye. If you’re looking for help, here are a couple of people you can contact at Straight North:

- For a high-level discussion of website strategy and development, contact **David Duerr**, Straight North CEO.
- For more technical questions from you or your team, contact **Ian Stevenson**, VP of Business Development. Ian has worked on website projects and Internet marketing campaigns for more than 10 years.



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About Straight North

WE ARE A TEAM OF FORWARD-THINKING INTERNET MARKETING PROFESSIONALS WITH BATTLE-TESTED STRATEGIC, CREATIVE AND TECHNICAL ABILITY. WE DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT INTERNET MARKETING SOLUTIONS THAT INSPIRE ACTION, GROW REVENUES AND INCREASE PROFITS. WE SPECIALIZE IN USING THE INTERNET AS A MARKETING CHANNEL AND PLATFORM FOR DRIVING LEADS AND INCREASING SALES TO GROWTH-MINDED COMPANIES — ALL UNDER ONE ROOF.

IF THIS INTELLIGENCE BRIEF SPARKED SOME THOUGHTS IN YOUR MIND ABOUT YOUR WEBSITE OR INTERNET MARKETING ACTIVITIES, PLEASE GIVE US A CALL TO DISCUSS HOW STRAIGHT NORTH CAN IMPROVE YOUR SITE'S CONVERSIONS, INCREASE TRAFFIC AND GENERATE POSITIVE INTERNET MARKETING ROI.

WITH CLIENTS THROUGHOUT THE U.S., WE HAVE OFFICES IN DOWNERS GROVE, IL (HEADQUARTERS), CHICAGO, IL, CHARLOTTE, NC, BALTIMORE, MD AND WASHINGTON DC.



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