

Using the Internet to Publish Product Information

By BNET Editorial

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It is simple, quick, and cost-effective to publish product information on the Internet. The Internet provides an unmatched level of accessibility and customer convenience, but for many companies, it may be best to consider Internet marketing material as a supplement to your regular print marketing material and not a replacement for it.

What You Need to Know

Do we still need regular printed product information if we publish product information on our Web site?

Publishing product information on the Internet is quick and cost-effective. Despite this, some customers still prefer traditional print product information, so you shouldn't abandon print material completely. Depending on the technical resources available to you, you may also have more flexibility to differentiate yourself through creative design and strong graphics using printed material. One possibility for combining your print and online product information is to offer Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) files of print publications through your Web site.

How much can I customize product information on the Internet?

The Internet is highly customizable. By creating unique Web pages for individual customers or customer groups, you can offer customized products, different pricing options, special offers, streamlined ordering, and other customer benefits.

How can I prevent competitors from accessing confidential information through my Web site?

If you need to publish confidential information on your Web site, you should take care with appropriate security measures to restrict access to this information. Generally, keep in mind that the Internet is a public medium, so the information you display should be publicly accessible unless properly secured.

What to Do

Simplify Distribution and Reduce Costs

The Internet makes it easy to instantly update sales and product information, allowing for substantial time and cost savings. It is estimated that an electronic product catalog costs less than one-fifth of a conventional catalog's printing, handling, and mailing costs. You can also use your Web site to get the word out about short-term special offers and other promotions with far greater simplicity than through other mediums.

Make Effective Use of Internet Technology

There are so many ways you can use the Internet to publish, distribute, and update product information or communicate with customers. Here are a few examples:

- Use an intranet or extranet to exchange information easily with corporate customers.
- Create electronic publications or Web pages targeted to specific customer groups.
- Allow individuals to use your Web site to search for product information or make orders.
- Exploit new technologies such as Java and Flash to customize Web pages with graphics, audio, and video.

Supply Detailed Product Information

Be sure products are organized in a logical way, for instance alphabetically or by category. Provide comprehensive product information, including detailed descriptions, prices, and technical specifications. If you have the technical resources, you might enhance your product listings using multimedia effects such as animation, voice, or video.

Customize Marketing

One advantage to using the Internet is that prices and other product information can be instantly adjusted to reflect current market conditions. You can also customize information for different customer groups, so that the information and pricing a person sees varies depending on which group they belong to.

Automate Sales Processes

Consider automating your sales information using sales administration software. This will allow tracking of sales activities by product line, product, customer, and point of purchase. It also provides periodic analysis of all sales activities, so that you can respond rapidly to new customer requirements or market conditions. Automating your sales processes will free up your staff to focus on other functions, such as customer relations, marketing, or sales.

Provide Quicker Information Access

Creating a comprehensive product Web site and search engine helps customers gain access to information quickly and easily. The increased convenience they experience will result in stronger customer relationships. You will also benefit from reduced customer support costs, because sales and technical staff do not have to spend valuable time searching for customer information.

Control Information Access

There are times when you might not want the public to see all information you publish electronically. For instance, you might publish confidential technical information for a specific client. Be sure to consider access control when you plan your Web site design, and consider carefully the information you want customers to see. Some pages may need to be password protected or otherwise secured.

Understand Your Audience

Before you publish product information on the Internet, it is important to understand your customers' information needs. The first step is getting input and feedback from customers and other users about what information they would find useful. Be sure to establish what information customers need, how it should be presented, and how often it should be updated.

When developing your Web site, focus first on publishing information that is most often requested by customers. You should also meet the needs of those groups that constitute your best or most frequent customers. Above all, be sure the information you publish is accessible and relevant.

Create a Centralized Document Database

Though updating information on the Internet can be quick, it is important to ensure that you have staff support in place for creating, reviewing, distributing, and updating content regularly. It is helpful to create a centralized document database for creating and managing content that links to your company's intranet. In this way, you can simplify updates, review, and documentation.

Establish Content Development Processes

Especially if different people are developing Web site content, you should establish processes that ensure consistent and high-quality standards. Processes should cover:

- which product information is published
- design or presentation guidelines
- categorization method
- content approval procedures
- personalization guidelines
- updating and adding new material

Establish Content Standards

Establishing and monitoring standards for Web site content will help ensure high quality. The standards should cover such issues as document length, layout and font guidelines, use of corporate identity, writing style, heading structure, use of graphics or multimedia, navigation, links, downloading formats, content review and approval procedures, copyright issues, and how to make updates.

Transform Print Documents into Web Site Material

You may not need to create Web site pages from scratch. Consider what traditional print publications you have already that you can convert to Web-based product information. Some examples include catalogues, product descriptions, data sheets, technical specifications, price lists, and product guides. However, it is important to take time to modify these print publications so they are easily navigable online and can be found by the various search engines.

Offer Additional Content As Downloads

Offering some content as downloads can help avoid too much clutter on your Web site. It may also spare you the expense of producing and updating conventional documentation, while ensuring customers and users always have access to the latest information. Product brochures, user guides, technical updates, and instruction manuals are just a few of the documents that you might offer as downloads.

The Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) is the most common software application for converting print files to an easily accessible, electronic format. The Adobe Acrobat Reader for viewing PDF files can be downloaded for free from Adobe's Web site as can detailed guidelines for producing electronic documentation.

Manage Web Site Updates

Whether it's product and technical information, product descriptions, availability, or prices, updating content is not always simple. To ensure quality, it is important to carefully manage the processes for updating your Web site.

Updates become more complicated the more product or pricing variations your Web site offers. Here is a suggested process for updating your Web site:

- Identify Web site content that needs updating;
- Identify updates to personalized pages;
- Collect changes from contributors;
- Update content;
- Ensure updates are reviewed and approved;
- Publish updates;
- Record the changes; and
- Archive updated information.

What to Avoid

You Allow Information to Become Out-of-date

Because Web sites are easy to update, customers expect them to deliver current information. Be sure to keep content current, including the latest information on pricing, delivery, promotions, and product lines. You should also keep people posted about content changes.

You Fail to Maintain Consistent Standards

When Web site updates are made by many different people, inconsistency in style and content may result. You can help ensure consistent, high-quality standards by establishing and monitoring publication guidelines or by appointing a Web site editor to review content prior to publication.

Your Web Site is Difficult to Navigate

It is essential that your Web site is easily navigable, especially if it is a main source of product information for your customers. This can be difficult if you have a large number of products. Be sure your product categorization and search tools reflect your customers' needs and not internal processes.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Krug, Steve. Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability. 2nd Ed. Berkeley: New Riders Press, 2005.

Web Sites:

Adobe: www.adobe.com

New Architect: www.webtechniques.com

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