

Web Realities



Whether you have a web site or are considering building one, these tips can help improve your internet results.

by *Eric Grant*

Upstate New York, with its rolling hills and sprawling woodlands, probably isn't where most people would look to find a successful registered Angus business.

But Rob Fanning, manager of Brookefield Farms of Hartford, a 300-head purebred operation, says its isolation from more traditional areas of Angus production provides it with some distinct advantages, namely a relatively untapped marketplace that stretches across New England and encompasses a strong customer base and plentiful potential buyers.

Key to the farm's success, Fanning says, is its web site, which allows him to communicate with existing customers as well as attract new ones. He estimates in an average month his web site receives 800-1,000 "hits." Most new visitors find him by "Googling" key words like "New York Angus farms."

"It's really worked well for us because it's attracted regional customers who're looking for registered Angus," Fanning says. "It goes hand in hand with our advertising and marketing efforts."

Fanning figures 10%-15% of his operation's private-treaty sales are a direct result of customers learning about his breeding program on the internet. He predicts that percentage will increase as emerging technologies — such as web-based, real-time auctions — continue to drive more people toward greater internet usage.

"The more people there are watching these internet sales, the more important our web site will be," he says.

Fanning also realizes his web site is a work in progress, something that's critical to his long-term success and requiring an ongoing commitment.

"We learned a long time ago that we've got to update our content about every quarter to keep people coming back," Fanning says. "Web sites are an ongoing process."

Getting started

Most experts agree that an effective web site hinges on your ability to continuously define, assess and reassess your web site's

goals, measuring how well it is attracting, educating and motivating your audience to do business with you.

The key to getting started correctly is understanding what works best — and what doesn't — and adopting technologies and design schemes that best communicate your message to others.

"I like to tell people to look at a variety of sites and see what works," says Lisa Bryant of The Cowboy Connection. "There's also a wealth of books and web sites with startup information. Then sit down and draw up your site on paper with all the information and visual elements that you want to include on it. Good pictures sell and are worth your time and money. Bad pictures are a waste of your marketing dollars. And, keep your web site domain name simple."

Another important component to developing and maintaining a good web site is locating a web designer that you can trust, says Sebastian Baerend of San Francisco-based SWB. Because you will be working

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with this person closely over a potentially long period of time, your web site designer needs to be someone you like, someone you can reach and someone you can communicate well with, he says.

Your web designer will also play a key role in helping you assimilate your goals and your ideas into a specification document, which essentially is the blueprint for the construction and ongoing maintenance and improvements of your site.

Without specifications that are agreed upon before you start, you and your designer will be developing the site blindly, and neither of you will be clear on your expectations of the end product or of the ultimate functionality of the web site.

"It's vital that you take the time to check prospective designers' references, look at their portfolio, and ask them several questions," Baerend says.

These questions, Baerend adds, should include:

- ▶ How long have you been in business?
- ▶ Who are your long-term clients, and how long have you worked with them?
- ▶ Do you develop web sites in the United States or at an offshore location?
"Increasingly, many web site companies are farming out their work to developers in other countries," Baerend

says. "It's essential that you insist on U.S.-based developers to do the work on your web site."

- ▶ Will I be assigned a single person to speak with regarding the development of my web site? "This is very important for consistent flow of information during the project," Baerend says.
- ▶ Who is my escalation point if I am dissatisfied with the point person?
- ▶ Do you write the specifications for the web site? And can I see a sample of a specifications document?
- ▶ Finally, do you charge by the hour or by the project? "It's preferable to arrange for a project-based rate and to only pay for ad hoc work on an hourly basis," Baerend advises.

"The inexpensive route is to go with web sites that allow anyone to build a site," says Clint Eccher of Advanced Web Design. "These are typically inexpensive but extremely unprofessional. The trick is to find a designer/developer who produces quality work at reasonable prices."

Generally speaking, the development costs for web sites range considerably, from the do-it-yourself applications on the internet for \$25 per month to thousands of dollars.

The prices for web site development are continuously going down, however, Baerend

says. "Web sites with online shopping carts and integrated payment gateways can be purchased for as little as \$1,500," he says. "Just five years ago, the price tag for such a web site would have been at least \$5,000 to \$10,000."

Keep in mind, too, the costs of web site maintenance will also need to be discussed with your designer and built into your overall budget.

Keys to an effective web site

Simplicity. A web site's primary purpose should be to allow users to find the information they're looking for about you and your products in a quick and efficient manner. In order for this to be accomplished, you'll need a simple design.

"Be subtle when using flash or other animated elements," Baerend says, "The purpose of such features should be to enhance the information, not to distract from it."

"A good web site has basically the same elements of a good print ad," Bryant adds. "A simple, clean, consistent, organized design with a clear message is the best route for anyone to take."

Great care should be taken to ensure the site loads quickly and is easy to navigate.

"I have high-speed internet, and I hate sites with an introductory page of flash and graphics," Bryant says. "What a waste of my time."

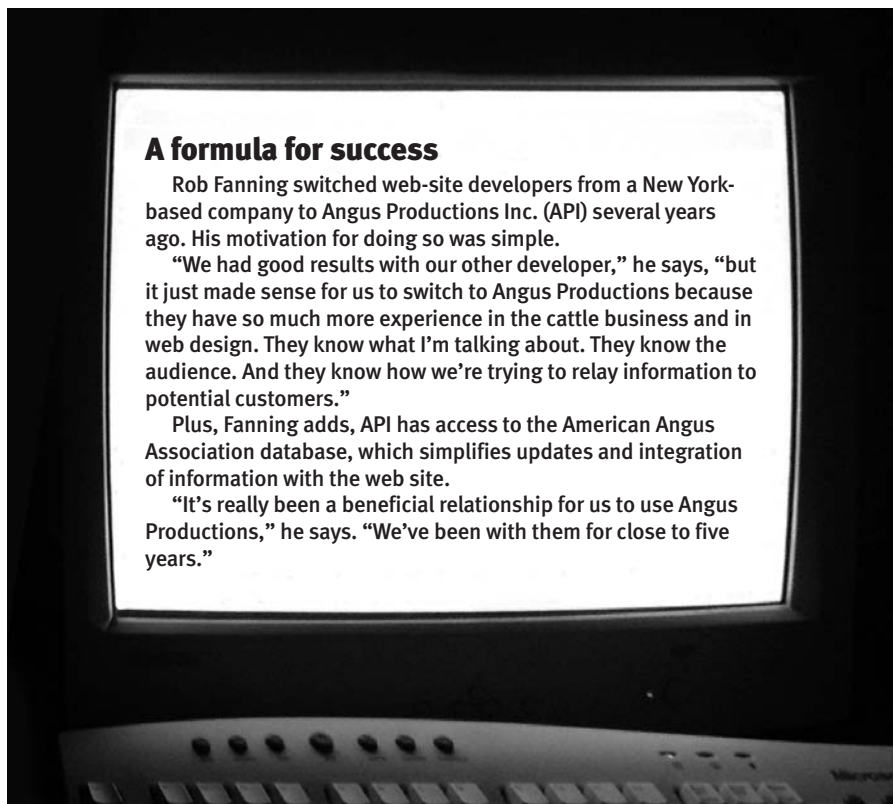
Efficiency. Users expect a web site to be fast-loading and intuitive, or user-friendly. This can be accomplished by avoiding elements that have intensive load times, such as using too many high-resolution photographs or graphics on your homepage.

"Keep large pictures off the homepage as much as you can," Baerend says. "Instead, make extensive use of easy-to-use, text-based navigation items — such as menus, submenus and clickable paths — which are vital elements of any successful web site."

Relevant content. The content on your web site needs to be relevant not only for human users, but also for robots dispatched by search engines to determine the relevance and ranking of your site. Developing content, in other words, often depends on your knowledge and incorporation of key words into your web site's text to ensure search engines can help drive traffic your way.

"It's imperative to provide your user base (human or otherwise) with a steady stream of fresh and relevant text. Before starting the writing process, it is also advisable to

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research keywords that are most popular in your industry segment,” Baerend says.

“If your site contains information that is easily accessible and presented in a welcoming environment, word is bound to get out,” he adds. “To optimize your web site for search engines, you must lead the search engines to believe that your site is the best possible match for a keyword that relates to your industry. Since search engines use robots to determine the relevance of any given site on the internet, it is imperative to understand what these robots have been programmed to look for.”

Baerend suggests you take a look at Overture’s “Keyword Selector Tool” (<http://searchmarketing.yahoo.com/rc/srch/>), which is an excellent resource for determining keywords and their popularity on the internet’s major search engines.

“Once you have determined and selected a variety of high-ranking keywords that best describe your business, be sure to incorporate these into your web site’s content as frequently as possible,” Baerend says. “This will inevitably lead to higher

search engine rankings and more traffic on your web site.”

Also, ask your web-site developer to add these keywords and phrases to your web site’s “meta description” (short sentences) and “meta keyword” (words only) tags.

“These tags are another element search engine robots are using to determine your business’s core competencies,” Baerend says.

Key to spurring traffic is developing an effective page description for use by search engines. The page description is normally a one-line sentence that search engines use to describe your web site to potential users.

“I recommend that you should consider submitting your web site to a search engine submission program such as *www.mycomputer.com*,” Bryant says. “These automatically submit your site to a number of search engines on a routine basis.”

Baerend suggests the following steps to optimize your presence with search engines:

- ▶ List your web site with the major search engines.
- ▶ Frequently update your web site with new content.

- ▶ When adding an image to your web site, be sure to include a description of that image in the image tag. Such descriptions are picked up by search engine robots.
- ▶ Instead of using images, use text-based navigation tool bars or menus.
- ▶ Exchange links with friends and business partners. “The more topic-relevant links that are pointing to and from your site, the better off you’ll be,” he says.
- ▶ Avoid using aliases to drive traffic to your site. “Registering multiple domain names, which all point to the same site with a different domain name, is frowned upon by search engines and may very well hurt your ranking,” Baerend says.
- ▶ “Do not add keywords to the background of your page which contain the same color of the background. Robots are unable to detect this, and this is also likely to hurt your ranking,” Baerend adds.

Mistakes people make

“The biggest mistake people make is failing to maintain their site and keep it current,” Bryant says. “If you want a web site, you’re going to have to budget and plan to service it often or it’s fairly worthless. People don’t want to see the site with material dated from 2001.”

In addition, people don’t always make the necessary “readership” accommodations for their audience when they develop their sites.

For instance, most farmers and ranchers are in their 60s, so web development for ag users should help — not hinder — readability. That means staying away from smaller fonts, and ensuring the web site is easily navigable.

“Keep in mind that not everyone sees what you see when it comes to web design, so you need to view your site on as many different platforms and browsers as possible and on as many different-sized monitors as possible to make sure everything on your web site displays properly,” Bryant says.

Finally, your web site is just one element of an overall marketing strategy. “If direct mail has worked for you before, don’t stop using it just because you now have a web site,” Bryant says. “Instead, use your direct mail now to drive people to your site.”

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About the sources

Sebastian Baerend founded SWB Consulting Inc. (www.swb-consulting.com) in 1999 in San Francisco, Calif. Since its inception, SWB has grown from a two-person software and web site development shop into a successful consulting firm with offices in San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles and Manila. Today, SWB’s client roster spans six industries and seven states in the U.S. alone. In 2003 SWB received the “Best of the Web” distinction by *Forbes* magazine for the best performing online real-time auction engine, defeating eBay among others.

Lisa Bryant owns and operates The Cowboy Connection of Ada, Okla., where she provides ongoing communication and web-based expertise to a wide array of clients. She served as managing editor for the American Hereford Association and was executive secretary of the Arkansas Beef Council. She is currently president of the Livestock Publications Council (LPC).

Clint Eccher of *A5Design.com* has been developing web sites since 1995. He served as assistant editor for the National Cattlemen’s Association. He is an award-winning designer and author of two web-design books. *Professional Web Design: Techniques and Templates* has been translated into five languages. His latest book, *Advanced Professional Web Design: Techniques & Templates*, released in September, covers the latest method of designing sites, using cascading stylesheets. This method is quickly becoming the industry standard.

Driving traffic

Just because you develop a clean-looking, easily navigable web site does not necessarily mean it will be successful.

“A good part of your budget should be used for marketing it — both through traditional means and through online opportunities,” Eccher says. “Word of mouth is also surprisingly powerful. The owner needs to get out and promote his site and services.”

Perhaps the key to driving people to your web site is simply letting them know of its existence.

“You have to advertise, advertise, advertise,” Bryant says. “Well-placed advertising definitely shows spikes in web site traffic. Every ad, business card, sign or marketing piece you put out needs to prominently display your web site address.”

And once you’ve got them coming, you need to work hard at keeping your content fresh and relevant to keep them coming back.

Gauging results

The easiest way to determine whether your web site is successful is if you’re doing more business. And a simple way to find out how much it’s being used is to simply ask your customers if they’ve visited and used your web site.

If you need more detailed traffic statistics, Baerend suggests a couple of free online tools, such as Alexa (www.alexa.com) and Google Analytics (www.google.com/analytics/), both of which can provide you with very detailed information about your web site visitors, including (in some cases) their geographic location.

“Some hosts provide statistical reviews of the traffic on your site,” Bryant says. “If your current host doesn’t provide that, it can be a worthwhile upgrade. This allows you to monitor the traffic on your site. A host I often use provides information on which pages are being hit, as well as when the hits are being made. You can also see information such as where people are being referred to your site from.”

Emerging technologies

Currently, there is a wide array of emerging technologies that will reshape web usage and development in the future.

One of them is prewritten “open-source” software that can be “plugged” into existing web sites and “played” by users. These “plug and play” applications include everything from discussion forums, chat portals or e-commerce suites that can allow

visitors to buy and sell your products, or even bid on products in an eBay-style venue.

“Ultimately, nontechnical users will be able to create their own e-commerce web sites with an array of features such as shopping carts, chat rooms and online credit card acceptance, without ever consulting with a software developer or web-site designer,” Baerend says. “The process of purchasing a full-blown e-commerce web site will become as simple as purchasing just about anything else online today.”

In addition, Eccher believes increased usage of hand-held PDAs, which link to the net wirelessly, will have a tremendous influence on web-based applications and sites. The rise of this technology is something that every cattle producer with a web presence should take seriously, and incorporate possible effects of it into their long-term web site plans.

Perhaps the largest technological shift in the next decade will be the move from client-based applications to web-based, centralized applications, Baerend says.

This will further increase internet usage by rural and urban users alike, and make the need for an effective web site presence even more important to cattle producers.

“These web-based applications will range from everyday word processing applications to highly intuitive inventory management, vendor management, e-commerce and process optimization tools that are currently available only to those who can afford the multimillion-dollar price tags for licensing, integration and never-ending maintenance that go along with such software packages,” Baerend says. “The increased demand will greatly improve the quality, accessibility and affordability of such applications. Once such applications become available to forward-thinking small- and mid-sized businesses across all industries, these companies will be able to compete with larger competitors on a more level playing field.”

