



Creating Digital Footprints Your Prospects Can Follow

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It just amazes me that so few business-to-business companies are not paying attention to the social network phenomena and creating more digital footprints on the Web. As general advertising effective rates decrease, the importance of creating a powerful Web presence is escalating.

I am not just talking about your company Web site, but rather the footprints you make as you take part in niche business oriented social networks, comment on blogs, create blog entries, participate in forums, distribute white papers, or see comments made about your company on other blogs. The Internet is a big place, and your company needs to be in many places at the same time.

The latest statistics on Web usage state that well over 70% of people conduct Internet research on a product or company first, before contacting the provider. If my experience counts for anything, I would say Web usage is much higher for business-to-business services or products.

There are three big misconceptions about business-to-business participation in social networks, forums, and blogs:

1- **The Internet cannot be controlled.**

Well, if you do not participate the Internet certainly cannot be controlled. Getting your information out to the public is a much better option than sticking your head in the Internet sand.

2- **We do not have the resources to keep up and we do not know how.**

In that case, hire a company like Octane to do it for you. As the Internet continues to become a dominant marketing tool, inactivity will give your competitors an edge. The fact is laying down digital footprints doesn't take as much time as you think, especially if your team is well trained.

3- **Internet marketing, especially social networks, is for consumer companies.**

Certainly, consumer companies can and do reap great benefits from the Web. They have to sell thousands of products to pay for their efforts. For many business-to-business companies, generating just one client will pay for an entire year of creating digital footprints. Keep in mind that your clients are consumers as well. They use the Internet at work and at home. You certainly want to be where they spend their time.



Not Fully Considered

It is my belief that many business-to-business companies are not aware of or have not fully considered the effect the Internet can have on their sales. Of course, not all business-to-business companies are the same, but most would benefit from initiating a digital footprint process.

Let's take a look at the very basic sales and marketing process for many business-to-business companies.

Sales Process Strategy

In basic terms, the best business-to-business sales strategy is to sell the appointment first. While this can be a one-on-one telephone call for some businesses, most will require a face-to-face meeting. Appointment setting techniques of the past are failing because to sell the appointment, you first must actually communicate with the prospect. This is a difficult task today because the prospects receive so many emails, they often ignore the ones you send, especially if they don't know you. They don't answer phone calls and they skim over magazine ads. If you want to get their attention, you will have to give them something of value and you will have to do it where they are most likely to pay attention.

Once this monumental task is done, the fun begins. You get to meet the prospect face-to-face (or phone-to-phone), and if you want to move the sales process further along, you will have to sell yourself and the company. Prospects actually buy from people they like, or at least, people they don't dislike. They also want to know you are knowledgeable and competent. As you are selling yourself and any team member who is at the appointment with you, you must sell the prospect on your company's ability to provide what the prospect needs.

Assuming you pass the test, you now get to sell the project or product. Later, I will discuss some tools to help you identify and influence your prospects.

Sales Process Tactics

There are three general sales tactics.

Without well-targeted and qualified leads, to whom will you sell? If you can't influence prospects to first listen to and then believe what you are saying, you will be wasting your time. And if you fail to build a relationship with the prospect, your opportunities to make a successful sale are almost zero.

So who's in charge of these tactics? Many Sales managers would say that Marketing should provide pre-qualified leads and they—the managers—will take care of influencing and building relationships. Marketing managers would say that Sales should qualify their own



leads, and that the Marketing manager's job is to place ads, send emails, and give Sales any responses they receive.

Well, maybe that worked in 1940, but not today. Both Sales and Marketing are responsible. Later, I'll talk about how you can use the Internet to help you with these tactics.

Marketing Strategy

The best marketing strategy to apply to business-to-business selling is target marketing. First, we build a universe of prospects from which we will select a target group and then a 'hot targets' list where the best and sweetest reside. We use mass tactics such as opt-in email marketing, contextual search engine ads and customer education to help us move prospects to the sweet center. The target list receives more attention, and the hot targets get personal attention from both Marketing and Sales.

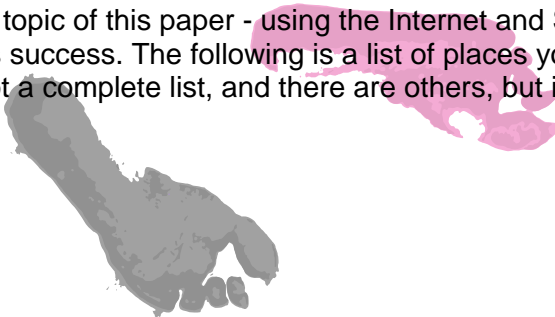
How do we do this? We use a variety of touch points (communications) that include Internet-based media and social networks, which is the subject of this paper. Because of the over-saturation of communications that prospects receive and summarily dismiss, we need to be sure we also communicate with relevant information and in places these people are visiting. That could be a Web site or a social network such as LinkedIn.com.

For Those Who Need Proof

CSO Insights, a company that researches the art of selling, has a lot to say about the drop in effectiveness of the sales process. First, the company found that prospects and clients get information about you through your own Web site and other sites where you or your company may be mentioned. This means your first impression is likely to be made without you present. It also means that if you learn to control your image online, you can help speed up the sales process.

CSO and common sense says that this means you must change your selling and marketing tactics. Instead of focusing on your company, service, or product, you must focus on your client's needs. I realize this sounds like a no-brainer, but the truth is that most marketers and salespeople tend to spend a lot of time telling a prospect how great the company is, instead of focusing on client's needs.

So, all of this leads us to the topic of this paper - using the Internet and Social Networks to plant the seeds of your sales success. The following is a list of places you should lay down your digital footprints. It is not a complete list, and there are others, but it is, I believe, a list of the most important tools.





Web Sites

One of the major digital media tools you should consider is a Web site (preferably one that is easy to navigate) that reflects the company's image and provides relevant and helpful information. A Blog is an excellent tool to include, and I speak more about Blogs later.

Email

Although email open rates are dropping, it is still the most effective and cost-efficient digital communication tool. There are numerous companies that provide excellent email service that allows you to track who opens your emails and clicks on your links. This will give you an indication of what your individual prospects are responding to and allows you to start providing information based on that interest.

Information Niche Web Sites

If possible, operating or sponsoring niche informational Web sites such as Octane's marcomgeek.com not only provides valuable information to prospects, but also helps in your own Web site search engine rankings and visitations. As part of a program that includes creating network groups on sites such as LinkedIn, a Niche Web site is a great group destination that generates interest in your company.

White Papers

Aside from being a great source of helpful information for your clients, white papers help to display your knowledge and increase your intellectual capital. In addition, emails featuring white papers tend to get better open-and-click-through rates and can be great lead generators when advertised through white paper services or contextual ads. White papers also make better subjects if you are conducting online advertising, and you can use services such as Knowledgestorm to market your white papers.

Case Studies

Case studies, reports, and surveys are all great tools for customer education. Like white papers, they can be turned into PDFs and made available on the Web. Also, they allow for no printing and no wasting of paper.





Company Web Site Blogs

The growth of Blogs has been incredible, and they are well accepted by the business community as a source of valuable information. You should certainly create and maintain a Blog on your Web site. Blogs provide fresh news on a daily or weekly basis and get people to return for more. In addition, Blog entries are great subjects for emails and other advertising. A Blog is different from a newsletter in that it can be made interactive by allowing comments from readers. This provides you with a direct link to clients and prospects, and acts as an informal market research tool.



Niche Web Site Blogs

Bloggng on other sites, under your company brand is a great way to gain exposure. There are plenty of industry-specific sites that are most likely hungry for content. Not only does blogging get you attention and increase your intellectual capital, but it also helps with search engine marketing by providing links back to your Web site.

Electronic Lead List

There are a number of online lists that you can use to gather your universe of targets. Some charge a flat yearly fee and others charge by the lead downloaded. Some even allow you to upload names of your own to earn points that are used to buy leads.



The List (www.thelistinc.com) provides a yearly subscription, and www.jigsaw.com and www.spoke.com provide leads on a per-name basis.

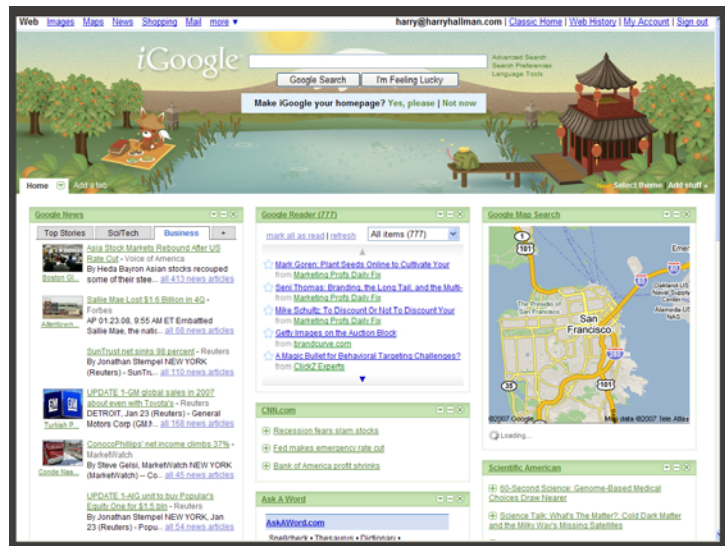


Search Engines

Of course, you can also find leads on the Internet. By reviewing Web sites, particularly the press release sections, you can identify targets. Even if the site does not offer individual emails, you can try to get them through an online service, or better yet, do a search on the URL and sift through the results. If you are lucky, you might find the email address you are looking for. On the other hand, you may find another person's email address that you can use as a template. For instance, let's say your lead is Harry Hallman and the URL is Octanecorp.com. You search and find bsutton@octanecorp.com. Because emails are generally formatted the same way within a company, you can assume that Harry's email address is hhallman@octanecorp.com. This method doesn't work 100% of the time, but you would be surprised how often it does work.

Internet News

Using the search engines and news services, you can review news about your hot target list companies to find gems you can use to help you create a relationship with the hot target. You may find a reference to something the company is doing that is a great fit for what you offer. Or it may be a bit of news you can copy or to which you can create a link in an email to the target. Eventually, your hot prospect will realize you have its best interest at heart and allow you to connect. You can set up filters on Yahoo! and Google (iGoogle is a personal page you create) to display news from specific companies or topics. Google also allows you to filter Blog entries on Blogs you select.



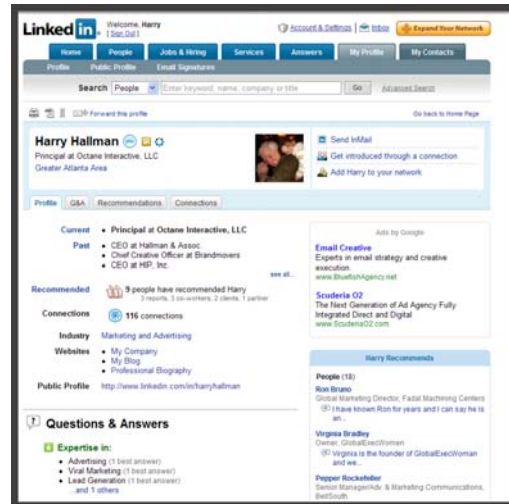
Contextual Ads

You may have a business-to-business product or service that would benefit from contextual ads on search engines such as Google, Yahoo!, or MSN. These ads can be globalized or regionalized to target your geographic areas. You can also set up ads to appear on specific Web sites.



Social Network Participation

Some business-to-business companies can use sites such as MySpace or Facebook to tap into the social network phenomenon. Currently, most would get better results by participating in business-oriented social networks. There are several general sites of note such as LinkedIn.com, Ryze.com, Fast Pitch, and Plaxo. LinkedIn is by far the most active at this point. There may also be niche social networks specific to your industry. Some searching on the Internet should reveal them.



Intellectual Capital and Leads

Many business-to-business social networks include an expert answers forum. You can post or answer other posts asking for help and information. Two very active expert answer forums can be found on LinkedIn.com and Marketingprofs.com. Yahoo! Answers is another forum to check out.

Participation in these forums can generate leads for readers and certainly helps to increase your social and intellectual capital. An added benefit is that search engines often pick up these posts and answers, and delivers them when people are searching for specific topics.

Blog Relations

Just as a PR Agency helps to build relationships with the media, you should develop relationships with the most important Blogs in your industry. You can make comments on the Blog and send emails with information that can be used to make Blog posts.

All of these activities help people locate you on the Internet. The entries you make on other peoples' blogs, your own blogs, and on forums, as well as mentions people make of your company, can all end up in search engine results. This information is also accessed by your prospects and clients at times convenient to them and from places on the Internet where they desire to be.





Creating digital footprints helps you:

- Generate and Influence Leads
- Influence Prospects' Opinions
- Begin Building a Relationship
- Create a Targeted Prospect List from a Universe

Digital footprints help your sales and marketing staff:

- Sell the Appointment
- Sell Your Company and Themselves
- Sell the Proposal

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