

Essentials for a Strong Web Presence

Make your solar company
Web site vital today *and* tomorrow.

By Ronald Fel Jones

Alongside the rapid transformation of the renewable energy industry itself in recent years, a corresponding revolution has taken place in the quality and effectiveness of solar company Web sites. The massive infusion of money, talent and resources into the solar industry has changed the rules of the game. What might have passed for a professional looking Web site in 2005 is unlikely to make the grade today. Most major system equipment manufacturers, wholesale distributors and large system integrators now have Web sites ranging from good to exemplary. This was not the case even 3 years ago.

It is not just the larger renewable energy companies reassessing the importance and quality of their current Web presence. Specialty equipment makers, system designers and solar dealers and installers are also discovering the growing importance and benefits of having an intelligently conceived, well-designed Web site.

You do not need the world's flashiest Web site, but you do need, at a minimum, to meet the rapidly improving industry standard. Why? Because if your competitor has a better Web site than you do, people will tend to think, consciously or unconsciously, that your competitor's business is superior as well. Rightly or wrongly, the quality of your Web site reflects on the quality of your business. And this will be truer still tomorrow. But getting up to speed with the competition is merely the beginning of a Web site's potential value to your business.

START WITH THE FUNDAMENTALS

When you develop a strategic Web presence, you are investing in a powerful tool that will prove its value from the moment your Web site is launched, or relaunched as the case may be. The site will increase its worth by serving you and your customers in a growing number of ways. Your first task is to create an outstanding basic Web site, one that expertly performs its most fundamental functions: to communicate an appealing and accurate picture of your company and to provide a user friendly roadmap to dealing with your company. As any Web user knows, sites that achieve these seemingly simple goals are not the norm, and we find ourselves frustrated whenever we land on a site that misses the mark.

Accomplishing this straightforward but surprisingly demanding objective is the most important part of the whole project. Everything you do later to enhance your Web presence depends on getting the first stage right.

So where to start? It might seem daunting to take a modest Web site and make it into something that meets or exceeds the best your competition offers. But this task does not need to be overwhelming, if you have a good game plan.

STRATEGIZE BEFORE YOU BEAUTIFY

Organizing, prioritizing and presenting information is what building a Web site is all about. It is tempting to jump to the presenting step too soon, before adequately organizing and prioritizing the information. This common mistake could be fatal to your Web CONTINUED ON PAGE 62

Anatomy of a Home Page

Name and logo on top
Make the name and logo clear and crisp but not overbearing.

A good photo does more than paint a pretty picture Photos should be aesthetically pleasing and invite the viewer into the site. Good photos also tell what your business does. If the business is local or regional, use scenes that viewers recognize as local surroundings. Getting great photography is one of the most important and difficult aspects of any design exercise, Web or print.

Use keywords in menu
Keywords in text placed high on the page boost your ranking in Google and Yahoo searches. The top menu bar is an ideal place for keyword-rich text.

Your quintessential statement This headline is your best chance to quickly convey to your potential customers that they have found the right place. Invest the time and thought necessary to get this mother of all messages just right.

Nothing sells like customer testimonials Be sure to ask permission to edit supportive quotes for length and clarity.

State your unique selling proposition Clearly and succinctly say what you do and why you do it better than your competition.

Market segment gateways Help your viewers readily identify their needs on your site. Here is where they are most likely to find the answers to their questions.

Showcase your installations Showing your work builds customer trust. This frame rotates through a gallery of five customer installations. Clicking on a photo leads to a gallery with additional photos of similar jobs.

Show your credentials You have taken the time to study and improve your craft. Now post your credentials on the wall. ●



Close the deal Carefully consider and determine the action you most want a Web site viewer to take. Make an attractive graphic, button or icon to link to that action. This would be analogous to a "Buy Now" button on a Web store. Be sure to place this action link on every page.

independentpowerllc.com The Strategic Word worked with Independent Power founder, Dave Palumbo, to launch a revamped Web site that reflects the critical organizing, prioritizing and presenting work discussed in this article.

site's effectiveness. Truly superior copy and design depend upon giving the writer and designer a well-considered, meaningfully packaged body of information to work with.

This is precisely the central task: creating a coherent body of information. Because Web interaction involves two parties, you must organize and prioritize the information from two points of view—your own and that of your customers and prospective customers. It is in the integration of these two points of view that the alchemy of this process resides.

REORGANIZE WHAT YOU KNOW

The information you provide must be presented in a way that is meaningful to the viewer. The goal is to make it easy for your visitors to readily access the information they need and, in the process, show prospective customers how your company can help them meet their needs.

This vital information rarely exists in a viewer centric, user friendly format. You need to carefully tease apart the existing knowledge about your business, review and study it closely, and then put it back together in a way that makes it easy for viewers to find what they want.

The process can be compared to moving to a new home. You could just pack everything up, put it in the truck, move to your new home and unload the same items into a different setting. Or, you could take the opportunity to go through your furniture, clothes and stuff in the garage, kitchen and basement to decide what is important, what has lost its usefulness and what needs fixing. Now when you get your processed and repackaged items to the new house, you can more effectively put things where they belong. You can display the items you want to make your home warm, friendly and functional, and store the rest in places that make sense and are easy to find.

With a Web site, your "stuff" to review and repackage usually will be found in some combination of four primary sources: an existing Web site; marketing and company materials; Internet research on the industry and competition; and direct conversations with people, mainly key company staff but also, if possible, a few key customers and even suppliers.

ENGAGE IN A STRATEGIC REVIEW

Sorting through the data at hand and asking incisive questions can elicit insights and reveal key information. Most business owners are too close to the situation to perform this strategic review effectively. Consider

hiring a marketing consultant, or perhaps you can call on a friend or colleague whose business acumen you respect.

Whether or not you get outside help with this task, be sure to involve key staff in the process. Not only will they have constructive input to offer, but also getting your partners and employees to participate in this important undertaking is a valuable team building exercise. Dave Palumbo of Independent Power, for instance, reports that the value he and his staff received when undergoing the strategic review critical to upgrading his Web site extended beyond the new site. "Even as an experienced hand in the solar business," says Palumbo, "I definitely learned more about marketing my company and products from doing this project."

Organizing this information and packaging it all in a new, viewer friendly format is a creative, largely intuitive strategic exercise—more art than science—that will differ significantly each time it is undertaken. Though the content of the process varies, a few key goals are always paramount.

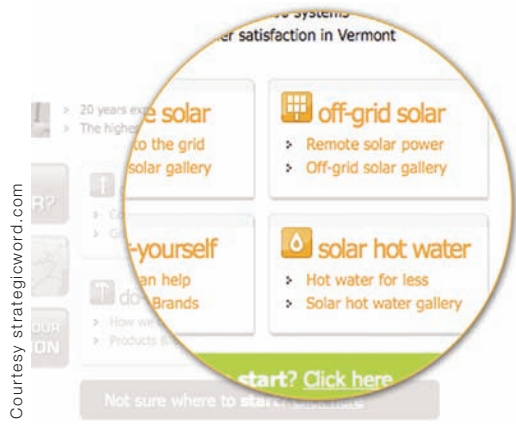
Determine your core, differentiating theme. This may be the most important strategic communications exercise you will ever undertake. The beginning point for any successful marketing campaign, Web or otherwise, is to clarify your vision about what makes your company unique in your market—to decide who you are. Identify what differentiates your products and services from the competition and then create an online identity and craft core marketing messages that emanate from that identity.

Perhaps you are the oldest or the largest solar business in your market—both strong selling points if you can back them up. If you are a newer solar company, look for ways to differentiate yourself from your competition. Are you NABCEP-certified? Are you a one-stop, full-service

dealer that even processes all the incentive paperwork? Maybe you are launching an online store that promises the best prices or the best tech support. Perhaps you are the only installer in your area that performs both grid-tied and off-grid installations. Conversely, maybe you do off-grid exclusively (or grid-tied or solar water heating) and thus you are not distracted by other demands—the "we do one thing only and we do it well" angle.

The point is to determine your unique selling proposition, make a compelling story out of it and lead with this theme. Back it up wherever you can.

Segment your markets. When people come to your CONTINUED ON PAGE 66



Include prominent market links Clearly define your markets, then give your viewers attractive, easy-to-find links on your home page like these from Independent Power (independentpowerllc.com).

Web Tools and Functions to Consider

You can begin to add new online functionality once you have completed your basic Web site. Here are some of the more popular ways to improve not just your Web site per se, but also the way your company does business as a whole.

Information repository. One simple and valuable function your site can provide is to serve as a data bank of useful information your customers and prospects can download. When you put online the documents you commonly send to your customers and prospects—product literature, spec sheets, price lists, manuals, essays—everybody benefits. Your customers get the information they want on demand, and you do not have to print or mail anything. Also, you can upload private information that you do not want everybody to see, and then password-protect the page. Your Web

host should have a simple way for you to do that.

This entails one cardinal rule: You must keep the downloadable information up to date. Bad data is worse than no data at all.

Search engine optimization (SEO) The importance of ranking high in Google and Yahoo searches varies from business to business. If attaining a high ranking is critical, as might be the case with an online solar store for example, optimizing your site for search ranking can be a complex task. Google provides excellent SEO information (see “Custom Search Engines Help” at google.com/support) or you can view a free tutorial at increaseranking.com/seotutorial.html.

Provide downloadable PDFs Making key documents available online saves you time and money, and your customers and prospects get the information they want immediately.

com/support) or you can view a free tutorial at increaseranking.com/seotutorial.html.

Most solar dealers and installers do not need a sophisticated level of SEO work. The majority can attain a solid ranking by covering the basics, which include determining the keywords people use to search for your type of business and then using them as often as possible at the top of each page, making a keyword-rich page title, keeping your HTML clean and securing links to your site from directories and other sites. However, search is a big subject, and if ranking well is important to your success, it pays to seek expert help.

Specials and product or service announcements. Nothing attracts buyers like sales and discounts. The wholesale distributor AEE Solar (aesolar.com) always features a special offer on its home page. It is a good idea to set aside a place on your home page to feature new products or services, or link to any news items of note.



Showcase what you sell If you are an equipment vendor like AEE Solar (aesolar.com), display product photos on the home page. If you are an installer, show your installations.

Photo gallery of installations. If you are an installer, be sure to shoot quality photos of all your installations, and then put up one or two of each job. If you are a new solar installer, get your first installs up as soon as you can. If you have been in business for years and have scores of installations, put up the more recent and interesting ones.

You can make use of a rotating gallery of photos on your home page and add links to further images from there. For a more comprehensive treatment, create a single page for each project that provides details of the installation and additional photos.

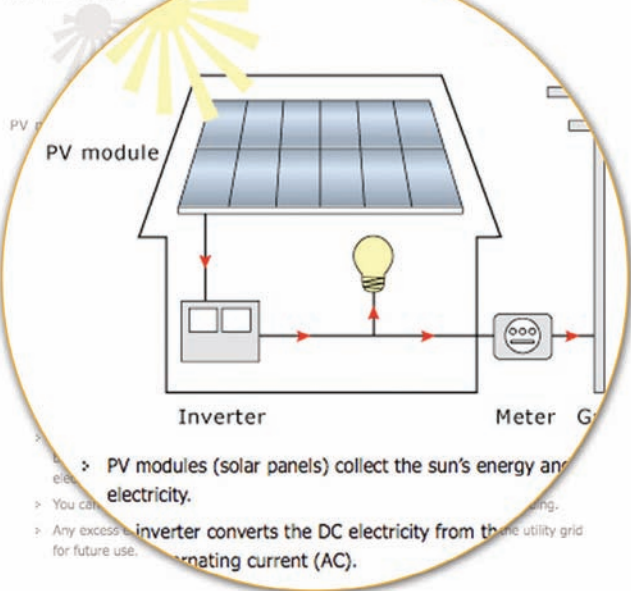
Be sure to get a good photographer to take these pictures. You do not necessarily need a pro, but at least find somebody who has a good feel for basic photography.

Solar education. Many larger solar companies dedicate a portion of their Web site to educating people about solar, and a growing number of dealers and installers do so as well. However, since doing a good job of consumer education is no small undertaking, a hybrid approach is advisable.

I recommend creating a page on your site with a brief synopsis of the advantages of going solar, plus key information on solar tax credits, rebates and any other incentives available in your market. Link to one or more of the hundreds of good solar education sites already out there; there is no need to reinvent the wheel. You can choose from many excellent nonprofit, government and utility online sources of solar education. Search around for one that looks and feels good to you. It never hurts to ask permission to link, though in most cases this is not required.

Unlike every other method of generating electricity, solar power systems have no moving parts. This translates into both long life and very low system maintenance.

How it Works



Courtesy strategicword.com

The Web is a visual medium Be sure to use lots of pleasing images, especially ones that help tell your story, as Independent Power (independentpowerllc.com) did here.

Simple and secure online forms. Creating online forms for everything from secure email and event registration to customer surveys and dealer applications can be a real time saver for you and a simple, immediate way for your customers and prospects to submit information. It also provides a well-organized way to collect data.

You can hire a developer to make a customized form, or you can use an online service like FormSpring (formspring.com), which provides a fairly simple user interface that a nonprogrammer can master with a little time. Other popular form building sites are FormSite (formsite.com) and FormRouter (formrouter.com).

E-newsletters. Any marketer will tell you that your customer list is your most valuable asset. It is truly amazing how rarely this potent resource is put to use. The first task before using your list for online promotion is, of course, to make sure you have a system in place to get all your customers' email addresses. Now you can send them a newsletter on a periodic basis, perhaps monthly or quarterly. A good e-newsletter will typically have some mix of news, useful information and specials.

You can make your e-newsletter look great, with quality design and images, by using an online email marketing service such as Constant Contact (constantcontact.com) or Campaign Monitor (campaignmonitor.com). These services are quite reasonable in price, and they have the added bonus of expertly handling the task of list management for you.

Interactive communications. One of the most powerful functions your site can provide is a way for you to interact directly with your customers and prospects. You might start one or more blogs

where you post upcoming events, sales, new product info, new hires—anything your customers might find interesting or useful. You can also set up a forum where site visitors can start their own discussions related to your company, products and services.

Discussion forums and blogs can be very effective, but they require a real commitment to keeping them going and moderated. Posting just once a month is not likely to attract much of a following.

Solar calculators and estimators. Online solar savings calculators and system cost estimators are getting more popular. Some third-party calculators are available, such as the one from Solar Estimate (solar-estimate.org), which allows you to place a customized link to a solar estimator on your Web site after setting up a free account.

Live tech support via chat or video chat. Live chat features allow you to address product questions while viewers are still online. You can build customers' confidence and trust by showing them that a live agent is just a click away. This is a major project that requires a big commitment, but the increase in your ability to serve your customers and boost sales may be commensurately large. For a good overview of live chat and available software, see Live Chat Support Software Review 2009 (live-chat-support-software-review.toptenreviews.com).

Online training. If you need to train or educate customers directly, online classes and webinars are worth considering. Popular sites like GoToMeeting (gotomeeting.com) and WebEx (webex.com) make the technical logistics pretty simple; the real work lies in creating a top-notch presentation.

Online store. Selling products online is getting easier all the time. The size of the project depends largely on how many products you want to sell. It is fairly simple to sell a few products using one of the scores of shopping carts available at a wide range of costs, some even free. It is far more work to set up an online store selling thousands of products. E-commerce is a subject well beyond the scope of this article, obviously, but there are many Web resources where you can learn more about selling your goods online.

Content management system (CMS). CMS services enable clients to update their own Web site through a simple interface without the help of Web professionals. If you have a fast changing, multi-office company that requires frequent updates by more than one person, you might consider a CMS at some point. It comes with a price, both literally and in terms of some unavoidable compromises to design and searchability. Proceed cautiously, and do not even think about using a CMS without first doing the homework to properly structure your Web site. Once you commit to a CMS, making basic changes to the structure of your site can be problematic.

This is by no means a complete list of possible Web tools and functions to consider. The key point is that tools like these are continually being developed and perfected, and companies that deploy them competently are enriching the value of their sites for owners and users alike. ●



If your competitor has a better Web site than you do, people will tend to think that your competitor's business is superior as well.

Web site, they want to quickly find the information they are seeking. Most important, they need to know if you sell the kinds of products or services they seek.

For example, if I come to your site interested in solar water heating systems, and you also sell grid-tied PV, off-grid PV, wind and micro-hydro systems, do not make me hunt to find DHW. You may lose me before I find it. Moreover, when I do find that link to solar hot water information, I want to believe that what I am looking for is important to you, not just a minor part of your business.

You can accomplish this by devoting a page or section on your site to each market segment—and that segment alone—and then linking these pages with attractive buttons or icons prominently displayed on the home page.

Find ways to indicate trustworthiness. However wonderful the products and services you offer may be, if potential customers do not get a strong sense that they can trust what you say and do, all is for naught. Given the detached nature of a Web site, as opposed to a brick-and-mortar store where customers can visit and find somebody to talk to, engendering trust online takes a concerted effort.

If your company is well established, this alone helps to build trust. Make sure viewers know you have been in business for 5, 10 or more years. If your business is new, your task is more challenging. If you are new to solar but have electrical or general contractor experience, emphasize that. State any training, certifications and licenses you or your staff may have. Join the Better Business Bureau and local Chamber of Commerce and list your memberships.

Show your installations on the Web site. Solicit written testimonials from your customers. Nothing is more powerful than a third party extolling your virtues. Since testimonials without full attribution lose their value, be sure to get permission to use your customers' names and also the right to edit their comments to make them short and punchy. Satisfied customers are generally happy to do this.

Another factor that helps establish you online as a competent, trustworthy vendor is the quality of the Web site itself. People who do not yet know you are more likely to trust your company if your Web site looks professional and does its job well.

A GOOD WEB SITE BEGINS AT HOME

Now that you have completed the strategic review, and you have packaged the relevant information into viewer friendly components, your site is ready to be written and designed.

The home page is by far the most important page on any Web site. If your home page does not capture viewers' interest

and prompt them to learn more about your company, you have virtually no chance that they will "turn the page" to explore further. Moreover, you have maybe 10 seconds to elicit the viewer's desire to proceed. Now all the work you did to process and repackage company information will prove its value.

Virtually everything you will ever put on your site falls into one or more of these categories:

- Who we are
- What we do
- Who we serve
- How we can help you
- Why you should do business with us
- Why you can trust us
- How you can reach us

Since a good home page is both a gateway to and a microcosm of your whole Web site, it should address each of these vital categories in an incisive and pleasing way. (To see how this goal was accomplished in a real world example, see "Anatomy of a Home Page" on p. 61.)

BEYOND HOME

Utilizing your strategically packaged information to guide the construction of your home page carries with it an enormous additional benefit: It lays the essential groundwork for creating clear, smooth and intuitive navigation throughout the Web site.

Clear navigation is aided by clean and spacious design. You never want to overwhelm the viewer with too much information on a page. Keep your pages open, free flowing and uncluttered.

If you have both the time and the well-honed skills to create a top-flight Web site yourself, great! But if you do not, hire professionals to perform this challenging task. The days of the homegrown business Web site have disappeared. You cannot afford to be left behind.

Your strategic review, combined with talented copywriting and design, will enable you to attain the Web developer's Holy Grail: clean, well-lit pathways from your home page out to every corner of your Web site.

Finally, remember to promote your site. Put your URL on everything: business cards, ads, press releases, trucks, packages, signs, letterhead, invoices, email signature—everywhere! ☺

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