

Differentiate or die

Do you have a poor website conversion rate simply because you're an online also ran?

A guest article from Steve Jackson:

Being online is no longer enough. It's a simple fact. Go online and you will find that every man and his dog are there selling the same products you are, claiming they can do a better job than you, and generally taking away your market share. So what are you going to do about it? This article explains why differentiating yourself can make all the difference between getting a good website conversion rate and being another 'also ran' in the horse race they call the Internet.

Getting our own house in order...

Only 12 months ago, we developed a website called hj-consulting.com, representing a company called H&J Consulting. At first glance, you might think there wasn't anything wrong with that. Surely, a company called H&J Consulting having a dot com website of the same name is hardly an earth shatteringly bad idea. You might even be forgiven for thinking that it is quite logical and reasonable. However then you would be falling, as we did, into the 'me, me, me' trap, a fatal online mistake. The fact is that no one cared what we did, who the people of H&J Consulting were, nor what it was we sold; they only wanted to know what we could do for them.

From our point of view, we solved problems that people were having in generating leads and selling on line, but from a Google point of view, we may as well have been a firm of lawyers. We did the same things other firms did, such as sending out press releases and talking about our products, but the truth is, we never really solved problems when visitors got to our site.

In our defence, we quickly realized we were onto a loser. Our measurement systems told us that most of the traffic that arrived was leaving after looking at our landing pages because they got to us and found the wrong thing. This was mainly due to our own online naiveté in the way we sold our products. I look back at it and am amazed that in the early days we ever sold anything at all.

So what did we do about it?

Three months after our website went live, we began looking at our options. We realized very early on that sending a poor message through the web front for our business wasn't doing us any favors. In order to change this, we decided to focus on what we were very good at. This meant dropping those services and products in which we didn't believe we could out-shine our competition. We dropped web design, e-commerce, content management systems and tailored database development from our product portfolio and started selling what we did best, improving website conversion and measurement. We changed our website name from H&J Consulting to something that was more appropriate to our line of business and more differentiating, The Conversion Chronicles. The website itself was designed as a resource first so that people would use it and more importantly find it in web searches. Everything we did became geared toward educating and earning trust from our visitor and getting them to opt-in to our website by subscribing for free.

So how do you do it?

By being different, by making yourself stand out from the crowd. I don't want to continue to go into what we did because that would turn this article into a press release; instead, I want to try to tell you how to do it. So here's some practical advice on how to differentiate yourself and your website.

1) Examine your marketplace.

List your top competitors, the people who you're currently going to have to fight for market share. List their attributes, the one thing that each company tries to communicate, and see if they own anything. By owning something, I mean a word, a concept, an idea about the products they are selling. You're looking to find their strengths and weaknesses as they exist in the mind of the customer. Your objective, at this stage of your research, should be to find something in your product that no one owns. This is also useful in order to see if your idea is actually viable and it's never a bad idea to research what your competition is doing. This is actually the vital stage in differentiating yourself from your competitors; you have to find out how they are currently perceived.

2) Find your difference.

You're looking to be unique, to find that one thing which separates you from your competition. There are many ways to find your difference. Being the first or the market leader is a differentiator. Harvard is the number one university in the United States and it plays on that perception. Owning a characteristic or a word is a differentiating idea. In our own example, The Conversion Chronicles, our goal is to own the word 'Conversion'. Owning an attribute is a differentiator. Volvo owns 'safe', Ferrari owns 'speed' and McDonalds owns 'kids' in the sense that it's a fast food restaurant for children. Heritage is a differentiating idea. If you have been in business for 70 years and have served 50,000 customers, then no one can take that away from you. It makes you different. Locality can make you different if you're the only company in your region selling what you sell. Being a specialist can make you different. Sean D'Souza is an internationally known marketing consultant specializing in what happens in a customer's brain and his company name is different, Psychotactics. How a product is made can make it different. Dove Soap according to David Ogilvy, is the number one in the USA with its main difference advertised by Ogilvy & Mather as 'Moisturizing Lotion', the difference is the lotion in the soap. Being the latest or the newest can make you different. So with these thoughts in mind, examine your products or services and find your difference.

3) Make sure you can do what you say.

Finding your difference and knowing the market is one thing, but you actually have to be able to back your uniqueness up. If you market yourself in a differentiating way, you should be able to demonstrate that difference. Dove Soap, for instance, has got moisturizer in it!

4) Tell people about your difference.

In effect, this is the part where you start developing your website with the difference in mind, all your communication and messages to your potential customer should be about passing on that difference. Get down to the nitty gritty, the website title, your domain name, your tag line or slogan, your articles, your company perception, your email signatures, everything that you communicate should tell people why you're different. Indeed if it's required, don't stop at your website, your advertising, your brochures, your business cards, even your yearly Christmas gifts should all communicate why you are different from your competition.

So how does all this affect your website conversion rate?

In our case, by changing our tack and moving from H&J Consulting (the world famous web development, company – not!) to the resource which our website has become has improved subscription conversion rates by 10-15% per month. We used to get 4-5% of our web visitors inquiring about our services or subscribing to our reports and free material when we called ourselves H&J Consulting – now we get 15-20%.

As soon as we differentiated ourselves by looking at our competitors, finding what we did which was different from them, backing up what we said through online education and resources and communicating the difference through the website we saw the big changes in conversion rates. In fact, we now find ourselves being regarded as experts in the measurement and web conversion niche. Like everyone else, we have competition, but there is a clear distinction between them and us. We now find them copying some of the things we do, which proves we must be doing something right. I get daily emails asking for help and advice on our given subject and I give it freely as best my time allows because I believe thoroughly that what goes around comes around. As a result of our conversion rate improving, our bottom line has also improved.

In summary

Differentiate or Die, says Jack Trout in the book of the same name – a good read by the way. In the case of selling products or services online, if you aren't perceived as being different from someone who is selling the same thing somewhere else, then it stands to reason that stronger competition will take your market share, drastically reducing your conversion rate. Your difference is important. When you stand out from the crowd, you get recognition. By doing that, you are well on your way to improving the conversion rate of your website, if not your offline business activities as well.