



Make Your Web Site a Real-Time Machine

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So ubiquitous have Web sites become that it's hard to believe they've been with us for less than 20 years.

It was the 1994 introduction of the browser-enabled World Wide Web that gave birth to the Web site. Since then they have gone through about four stages of evolution:

1. Early on, Web sites were just “brochureware,” online versions of sales catalogs, corporate profiles, annual reports, and other print collateral.
2. Once people realized that they could add more content without running up a huge printer's bill, from 1997 online publishing proliferated in the “Content is King” era.
3. Around the turn of the millennium, as search engines became the primary means of accessing online information, businesses focused on “search engine optimization strategies” to drive traffic to their sites.
4. As consumers learned to use search engines as powerful research tools they naturally began to reward companies who thought like publishers of information, not advertisers of products. I wrote about this new way of doing business in my 2007 book *The New Rules of Marketing & PR*.

Now, we're entering a fifth era of the evolution: transformation of the Web site into a real-time marketing (and sales) machine. This is the natural evolutionary outcome of a process that started with a new way to slip brochures under people's doors.

We are arriving at a place where online presence is tangibly *alive*. Like walking into a physical retail space, you immediately encounter real people. They welcome you and greet you by name, or introduce themselves. If you ask a question, they respond right away and in context—not with a list of FAQs. From there, you may quietly browse the shelves and make your purchase—without lining up or talking with staff. But the moment you look puzzled, an insightful shop assistant rushes over to offer help.

We all know what to expect in a real-time retail experience—we get it every day at bricks-and-mortar outlets. I get impatient if I have to wait more than a few moments for help from a sales clerk (when I want it). And I get annoyed when I’m just browsing and a sales clerk insists on badgering me. But if I had a query and the clerk responded to my question with a list of FAQs, I’d walk out never to return.

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Until now, consumers have been so amazed by the research power of the online experience that they’ve tolerated robotic answers and snail-mail response times. Inevitably, though, expectations will ratchet up, not down. And that makes real time an inevitable standard that your site must match sooner than later.

Looking around, I don’t find much evidence that business, large or small, sees what’s coming down the pike. Too many organizations are still stuck in the brochure-ware era, when next-day or next-week response was acceptable.

Let’s look at how you can engage people at the *precise moment* they are interested in what you offer.

Respond Now, While Buyers Are Hot

It's easy for a one-man or one-woman business to respond to inquiries in real time—especially in a recession. When things are slow you stare at the phone and check your e-mail several times an hour. You leap on any opportunity as it comes in. But what happens when you're busy? And how do you cope if you run a global enterprise with thousands of employees?

The answer is automation.

By automation, I don't mean those stupid, impersonal, and frustrating auto-responders that “follow up” with canned e-mail messages. The real-time Web response machine I'm talking about cleverly uses automation to help humans respond to inquiries as they come in.

If the successful outcome to each customer inquiry in your business involves a hefty price tag or significant revenue over the long term, you probably need this capability right now. If you sell business-to-business offerings, you need this. If you sell cars or real estate you need this. If you seek parents willing to spend \$100,000 or more to send their child to your college, you need this. If you seek generous donations to your charitable effort or political campaign, you need this.

You need this because the sooner you engage your customer's interest the more likely you are to win in the end. And today that interest frequently begins with an almost offhand Web search.

Someone mentions Johns Hopkins University at a party so you Google it just to see if it might suit your daughter. Or you happen to see a photo of Madonna stepping out of a Maybach and wonder, “How much does a car like that cost, anyway?” If you engage people's first spark of interest you have an opportunity to fuel their curiosity and light their desire.

To learn more about Web site response automation, I spoke with Mikel Chertudi, vice president of demand marketing at Omniture, an online marketing and Web analytics business unit of Adobe.

“When you contact people quickly, the propensity to close that business deal goes up astronomically,” Chertudi told me. “Let’s say you’re interested in a new mobile phone. You might want a BlackBerry Curve or an iPhone, and you’re looking for a local dealer. When you reach a Web site you fill out a form that says, ‘I’m interested, get back to me.’ But if that company takes two or three days to respond, chances are that they’re not going to reach you, because you’re not in your office, or you’re not at your house, or you already made the purchase somewhere else. But if they could follow up with you within five minutes, when you’re still thinking about it, it’s going to greatly increase the likelihood of a sale.”

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Chertudi says that the automation process should collect two important pieces of information. Knowing the actual place on your site where the person expressed his or her interest allows you to reply in context. Similarly, it’s important to know the nature of the offer that interested the potential buyer. If he or she downloaded a guide or an e-book, your salesperson needs to know that.

Armed with this information, the automation takes over. “An inquiry can send a real-time alert to a company salesperson, and the salesperson can just pick up the phone,” Chertudi says. “You can have that sales lead automatically injected into a phone dialer. It can even contact the salesperson’s

mobile phone, and then connect the Web-site visitor and the salesperson in real time. Or the system can pop up an e-mail alert telling the salesperson what the visitor wants, so you immediately have a contextual basis for a conversation. All of that can be automated.”

The key to this type of automation is that information coming in on the Web site is tied, via an automated process, to internal systems for interacting with buyers. The links happen behind the scenes, alerting salespeople for real-time follow-up. In other words, the potential buyer’s expression of interest triggers an action in the company’s customer relationship management (CRM) and sales force automation (SFA) systems. The most important aspect is the trigger point—the point at which somebody actually raises his or her hand by filling out a contact form or responding to an offer. For example, anytime someone signs up for a Webinar, completes a survey, or downloads a research report, this action should trigger a response.

When you know the context that drives intent and you’re able to answer in real time, there’s no doubt that you accelerate your sales cycle.

Data from Omniture clients suggests that companies close more business when they address buyers’ needs not in several days (which is typical), but within five minutes.

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Know When She's Ready for You

One of the best examples of real-time follow-up I've seen is Bella Pictures, a company that provides wedding photographers in 36 U.S. markets, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago. I asked Teresa Almaraz, channel marketing manager at Bella, how they manage to catch the wedding bouquet.

Bella partners with large wedding-information sites like The Knot and David's Bridal and uses search-engine marketing to attract buyers. Bella's own site features offers such as a contest to win a \$4,800 wedding photo package and a free engagement photo session. One cool offer is the style tool that allows brides (yes, it's almost always brides; boys just don't grow up dreaming of weddings) to rate 20 pictures on such characteristics as indoor versus outdoor and posed versus candid.

"Brides love rating pictures," says Almaraz. "Then the tool reveals what kind of pictures are best [for them] with language like 'Oh, you're more of a romantic bride.'"

Whenever a bride-to-be uses one of the tools or responds to an offer, she's asked a series of registration questions. The answers are fed into Bella Pictures' automated systems.

Almaraz says the company built a real-time lead-scoring system based on data mined from Salesforce.com (Bella Pictures' CRM system) and Eloqua (the company's marketing-automation system).

"The business modeler used statistics to tell us how likely someone is to set an appointment based on the different variables," she says. "We then take the data from each inquiry into Eloqua, which prioritizes the hottest leads for our sales team."

From a real-time response perspective, two questions are the most important indicators of urgency: (1) Do you have a wedding date? (2) Have you chosen a reception venue? When the answer to both is "yes," the system flags this inquiry for immediate follow-up, because positive answers indicate

someone is ready to book a photographer *right now*. Weddings are about ritual—and rituals are highly predictable.

“Our leads are perishable,” Almaraz says. “During the time people are actually purchasing photography services, they’re sometimes meeting with five or six different photographers. So getting them on the phone right away is highly important for us.”

The Eloqua system used by Bella Pictures funnels each inquiry, with the lead score, to the appropriate sales rep for follow-up. Each sales rep sees the information in an Eloqua dashboard. If the bride-to-be completed the rating tool, that information is displayed in the dashboard as well. “We provide information in a digestible way for sales to have the data at their fingertips when they need it to make the call. It’s got their wedding date and venue. It’s got their lead score. And we know what kind of photos they’d like, so the rep is able to contact the person immediately and say, for example, ‘We noticed you’re a romantic bride, and actually we have a great photographer we’ve worked with near you who shoots very romantic photos and would love to meet with you.’ The more the rep knows about what brides are looking for when they respond, and the faster they respond, the more likely they develop a personal connection.”

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Test It Out!

For the automation process to generate the maximum volume of inquiries for real-time follow-up, you need to create and publish effective information offers or contact request forms.

Development of these offers and forms can itself be an exercise in real-time marketing and PR, because any offers you create can be tested in real time. Follow this procedure, which will allow you to choose the most successful offerings. So I recommend that you create a number of offers, test them on your site, and then choose the ones that generate the best responses.

Chertudi says that Omniture frequently tests messaging and offers, measuring how successfully each one drives demand. “Every month, we produce three or four Webinars with experts, influencers in the industry,” he says. “But before we put the final title on the Webinar, we test three to five different titles on a preliminary basis on our home page. And then, based on which one received the highest clicked response rate (meaning people fill out the form, download it, and give us their contact information), we’ll use that as the title. We have found that the title of a Webinar has the most important influence in driving the best results.”

Consumers’ online expectations are ratcheting up. Just as no one tolerates hour-long waits or robotic answers in a physical shop, they’re not going to stand for it online.

What's the Other Guy Doing?

In a new field like this it's useful to watch the pioneers and benchmark your efforts against competitors.

Compete, a Web analytics and online competitive intelligence company, draws on a diverse sample of more than 2,000,000 Internet users' online behavior in search of insights for companies looking to improve their online marketing. These two million consumers have given permission for their online click stream to be analyzed as part of an aggregated population. In other words, each individual's viewing habits are not made available, but the aggregated data from the entire consumer panel is analyzed. "We see what 2 million people are doing, down to granular insights," says Stephen DiMarco, chief marketing officer of Compete. "Think of it as a cross-sectional view of consumers, instead of just looking at what is happening at your own site, which allows for competitive benchmarking analytics on which you can act immediately."

Compete's benchmarking analysis can be delivered into platforms (such as Omniture and Eloqua, mentioned earlier) used by sophisticated real-time Web marketers, enabling them to compare their performance to similar Web sites. By understanding what's working on other people's sites you can often see how to improve your own. Here's one example that shows how.

Imagine you run a Chinese takeout restaurant with a Web-based ordering application. You can optimize your own site by testing for offers (e.g., if we put the main dishes first in the listing, do we increase the overall dollar amount of the average order?). But imagine laying on top of that data the collective information of how all Chinese takeout restaurants in the United States arrange their offers. Perhaps that data would lead you to an insight about featuring a "healthy option," something you had never even considered.

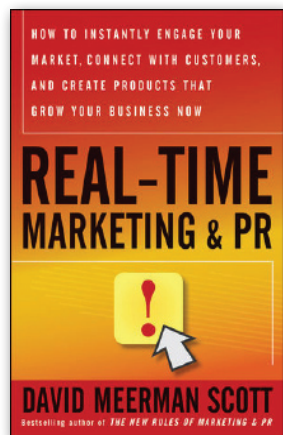
“A lot of marketers are now using A/B testing of multiple versions of content and tests for different offers, text, images or whatever,” DiMarco says. “They use that to implement real-time marketing updates and landing page optimization.” Adding the competitive benchmarking analysis component makes the A/B testing more valuable. “A major wireless carrier thought that they had optimized well using A/B testing,” he says. “But we compared against other wireless carriers, similar industries, and the best of the Web and found something significant that they were not optimizing. We made a recommended switch, and that campaign won hands down. When you have a large site with lots of transactions—say, a mobile phone supplier—if a small tweak to the site generates a 1 or 2 percent increase that can be worth tens of millions of dollars.”

The Internet fundamentally changes the timescales on which we do business, compressing time and imparting a competitive advantage to the quick.

The beauty of the external data supplied by Compete is that it provides a real-time benchmark of what’s going on right now at sites similar to yours. So while your competitors are doing long-drawn-out focus groups or in-person surveys that take months to compile, you can be analyzing today’s data *today*.

“It used to take a year to plan a marketing initiative,” DiMarco says. “Now strategic marketing can be done on a weekly basis, and tactical marketing can be minute by minute. Marketing has an opportunity to move faster; it is the last holdout of efficiency in many organizations.”

The more I learn about sophisticated tools like these, the more I look back at some of the crude tools we used to pretend were accurate metrics—and laugh. I’m absolutely convinced that tomorrow’s most successful marketers will be those who understand the new real-time technology infrastructure. The winners in the always-on world will be those who are most accurately and quickly driven by data. 📊



BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of David Meerman Scott's [*Real-Time Marketing and PR*](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Meerman Scott's book *The New Rules of Marketing & PR* opened people's eyes to the new realities of marketing and public relations on the Web. Six months on the *BusinessWeek* bestseller list and published in more than twenty languages, *New Rules* is now a modern business classic. Scott's popular blog and hundreds of speaking engagements around the world give him a singular perspective on how businesses are implementing new strategies to reach buyers. Now, in *Real-Time Marketing & PR*, Scott opens eyes again with his groundbreaking ideas on the opportunities (and threats) inherent in today's always-on, 24x7, instant business environment.

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