

Strategic Marketing Plan:
Web Portals for Senior Citizens

Kristin Davis

INF 387.2, Information Marketing

March 9, 2005

Introduction

A web portal is an information service organization defined as “a Web site that provides a starting point, a gateway, or a portal, to other resources on the Internet or an intranet” (Wikipedia). Early versions of web portals such as Yahoo! and Excite had a broad base of customers. While some Internet portals have remained broad based, many others have become specialized, offering “a Web site that provides information content on a common topic, for example a specific city or domain of interest. A web portal allows individuals that are interested in the topic to receive news, find and talk to one another, build a community, and find links to other web resources of common interest” (*OWL Web Ontology Language*, section 2.1).

The components which make up a portal vary from site to site. Some groups, such as the Open Directory Project, have put forth lists of required features that a site must contain in order to be listed as a portal. However, many sites call themselves portals without fulfilling stringent requirements. Some components which appear frequently on portal sites are links to topics of relevance, discussion forums, customization, email, news aggregation, and search capability.

The information service to be considered in this paper is Internet web portals aimed specifically at senior citizens. The marketing plan will outline six steps: situational analysis, objectives, strategy, tactics, budget, and controls (Kotler, p.112-113). Some references to the Touchtown.us portal will be made to lend substance to the concept of senior citizen web portals.

Situational Analysis

The first step of situational analysis should be to identify outside market forces which impact the product offering. The aging populace of the United States offers an opportunity for growth of web portal aimed at senior citizens. In 2003 there were 35.9 million people over the age of 65 in the United States. It is projected that the 65-and-over population will increase by 147% between 2000 and 2050, while the population as a whole will increase by only 40% (U. S. Census). This population trend indicates that demand for senior specific products will have a corresponding increase. The increasing dependence in the Internet for daily activities as well as the sometimes overwhelming array of options make web portals an attractive offering, particularly when economic constraints have forced many organizations to move large chunks of functionality to their website exclusively.

Situational analysis must also involve competitive analysis. Portals marketed to senior citizens already exist, but there is certainly room for improvement in product as well as marketing. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of your competitor, and compare them to your strengths and weaknesses. This comparison will illustrate which attributes of your product and marketing are superior and which areas need improvement. More importantly, the task will force your company to determine whether or not it has the ability to make necessary, critical improvements to the portal.

Objectives, Strategies, and Tactics

The first objective of this marketing plan for web portals is to create a detailed user profile for both current and future users. This will be accomplished through three strategies, the first of which is to consider current users. One tactic is to analyze existing user logs to determine which functions are most popular, which functions tend to produce errors or requests for help, and which pages users link to when they leave the portal. You may know that your users are senior citizens in the United States, but you need to focus on psychographics such as activities and interests in order to create a rich profile and allow for segmentation of product offering, pricing, and marketing communication.

Another tactic is to survey current users and ask them to suggest additions and improvements to the existing site, gaining user profile information as well as product development input. The involvement of current users in a redesign can be an invaluable tool. For example, current users could be involved in a card sorting exercise to determine where particular functions should reside within a portal site. Studies have shown that seniors tend to group items based on their functionality and labels tend to be “less formal than the category labels designed by Web site experts” (Kurniawayn and Zaphiris, p.296), so it is advantageous to get user input during the planning stages.

The second strategy for creating a user profile is to conduct a literature review. Primary sources should include census figures as well as trend forecasting geared toward senior citizens. Also consider studies on the physical and cognitive effects of aging, computer use among seniors, and the challenges created by combining the two factors.

Human-Computer Interaction and Usability guidelines should be taken into consideration, including general guidelines as well as those specific to seniors.

The third strategy for creating a user profile is a careful consideration of new customers, those you hope to gain through your marketing plan. Based on your current user information and your literature review, determine who you are missing in terms of demographics, psychographics, and so on. Consider what changes will need to take place in terms of product, price, place, and promotion to gain these customers.

The second objective of this marketing plan for web portals is to create a versatile product offering based on the detailed user profile. It is important to set goals early in this stage in order to measure progress and completion. Four strategies have been identified to contribute to the achievement of this objective. First, identify any platform constraints. The user profile should indicate common operating systems and connection methods among your customers. Make sure your product works efficiently across all of the identified platforms. Second, implement usability guidelines specific to seniors in the initial product design, such as large font size and uncluttered backgrounds. It is much more cost efficient to start with usable design than to add it later in the design process. Implementing these guidelines will force trade-offs and encourage your company to focus on what is most important to your users.

The third strategy to creating a versatile product offering is determining an appropriate pricing structure. Consider straight subscription, varied levels of subscription, and a no-subscription portal with advertising. The fourth strategy is to perform iterative

testing and make changes until a satisfactory product offering is achieved and previously determined goals are met.

The third objective of this marketing plan for web portals is to develop an effective communication plan. The first strategy is to utilize the existing site. Communicate improvements to current users through tactics such as informational e-mails, articles on the site, FAQ updates, and appropriate additions to the help menu. The second strategy is to gain new customers through an aggressive advertising and promotion campaign. Tactics may include, but are not limited to, advertising on other Web sites, magazines, and newsletters, and issuing press releases. Direct mail promotions may be appropriate, but always test a purchased mailing list before committing substantial funds to this form of promotion. Consider being a sponsor at a senior citizens event where you can offer prizes and giveaways.

A third communication strategy is to generate trust and buy-in from stakeholders. This category focuses on investors and company employees, but also includes users. Keeping stakeholders informed of the progress and intent of your redesign is important, as is seeking their input when appropriate. Creating a useful, profitable product offering is critical. Preparing a report outlining the ROI (return on investment) for stake holders is advisable, showing what the marketing plan will accomplish for the company as a whole.

Budget

The marketing plan budget encompasses all of the costs associated with situation analysis, generating a user profile, creating a product offering, communication, and

controls. Budgetary expenses should be as specific as possible and tied directly to the tactics and tasks outlined in the marketing plan. It is important to remember that some of the expenses incurred during execution of the strategic marketing plan will have value beyond the scope of one specific plan. For example, a rich, detailed user profile can be used again in creating alternate product offerings or marketing to customers who have left the company.

Controls

The final step of a strategic marketing plan is to monitor the progress of the plan, checking to see if goals are being met and if objectives need to be revised. The initial marketing plan for web portals to senior citizens must specify goals, time frames, and means of measurement. Many of the tools used in assembling the user profile are applicable to this step, such as analyzing user logs, reviewing customer contact logs, and surveying current users. Cost–benefit analysis should be conducted to gauge the effectiveness of communication efforts to gain new customers.

It is important to remember that controls are more than a six-month checkup after implementation of a new web portal design and the associated marketing strategy. Application of controls should be immediate and ongoing, until it becomes necessary to develop an entirely new marketing plan.

Touchtown.us

Touchtown.us is an example of a web portal aimed at senior citizens. The site offers email, discussion forums, news aggregation, games, search capability, and

customization capability. The site's "senior friendly design features include: no advertising, voice format email, senior-friendly visual design, variable font size, variable complexity, minimal burdens on short term memory, 'buddy system', easy attachments" (Touchtown.us), among other attributes.

Touchtown has variable pricing, ranging from simple email and portal access, to unlimited Internet access, email, and portal access. There are three basic product offerings: for individual, for senior living communities, and for membership organizations. Touchtown is clearly doing a lot of things right, but could benefit from a strategic marketing plan such as the plan outlined in this paper. The site has some usability and content issues, and the promotional efforts do not appear to be substantial.

Conclusion

The growth of the senior citizen demographic and the information overload all people face combine to create a unique and lucrative information service opportunity: web portals marketed to senior citizens. "In service industry after industry, technology creates the adapter's edge. The adapters become more proficient sooner, work out the bugs, and quickly recognize the benefits of the technology. The adapters learn and turn that learning into a great competitive advantage" (Beckwith, p.49). Companies who embrace this new channel of distribution, and learn how to market it in a superior manner, will be poised to serve our aging population with the best technology available.

References

- Beckwith, H. (1997). *Selling the invisible: a field guide to modern marketing*. Warner Books, Inc.
- Kotler, P. (2003). *Marketing Insights from A to Z: 80 concepts every manager needs to know*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Older American Month Celebrated in May. (2004, April 20). *U.S. Census Bureau*. Retrieved March 7, 2005, from http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/001746.html
- Touchtown is senior friendly. (n.d.). *Touchtown*. Retrieved March 7, 2005, from <http://www.hq.touchtown.org/forResidents3.htm>
- Web portal. (n.d.). *Wikipedia*. Retrieved March 3, 2005, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_portal
- Web portals. (2004). *OWL Web Ontology Language* (section 2.1). Retrieved March 6, 2005, from World Wide Web Consortium Web site: <http://www.w3.org/TR/webont-req/>
- Zaphiris, P., & Kurniawayan, S. H. (n.d.). User-centered web based information architecture for senior citizens. In *Panhellenic Conference with International Participation on HCI* (pp. 293-298). Retrieved February 3, 2005, from http://www.soi.city.ac.uk/%7Ezaphiri/Papers/pchci_healt.pdf