

Making Your Web Site Work for You

What should a web site do for an author? Simply stated, it should multi-task.

Easy enough to say, but what specifically does that pop phrase mean to the poor guy or gal who is trying to build a reputation and move stacks of books out of the garage and into readers hands? In the simple answer, the site becomes your retail store, requiring you to follow all of the steps a retailer must perform to sell inventory.

A site is so important to an author's promotional effort that I urge you to think carefully before you decide whether to create the site yourself or select a professional designer. The free templates you can find on the search engines are very tempting. I urge you not to take that route. Hiring a professional is perhaps the most cost-effective step you can take.

Authors Have Special Needs

When you search for a professional to do your design, make certain he/she has had direct experience in designing sites for authors. Make sure you get recommendations. Check out the designer carefully. Unfortunately, as in so many other endeavors, there are charlatans in this field. (I know. I hired one of them, and had to bail out pronto.)

The site should be activated four to six months prior to publication date. It functions as an advance promotional tool for you, the author, and announces your forthcoming book. At this early stage, sales tools (shopping cart, cash register, etc) are unnecessary.

What is needed, however, are the following sections that will continue to be important even after publication:

Home Page—The key element is an explanation of what your site is all about. A surfer will make the critical decision whether to stay or leave the site after that first view. The page must answer the question: Is there enough content here for me to spend time scrolling through? In addition, it must offer very simple and speedy navigation to bring the surfer to any section he/she desires. (The identical bar should appear on every page of the site to make it easy to move about.)

Overview of Your Book—Eliminate the adjectives. You are not praising the book, you are describing it, allowing the reader to make his/her own judgment. Just as soon as you are able to obtain endorsements and/or reviews by distributing Advance Review Copies, those become your “adjectives.” They are far more believable than your own evaluation of your book.

If fiction, try to give the reader a sense of the mood and the characters of the story. For nonfiction, stress content, giving readers enough information to whet their appetites and make them realize the book contains what they are looking for. Be sure to include a photo of the book’s front cover.

As you can see already, the presentation of a novel is somewhat different from that of a nonfiction book. It is generally accepted that readers of fiction are focused more intently on the author. Therefore your site should emphasize you and your background. For nonfiction, content is paramount. Therefore your site must emphasize the benefits a reader will gain from reading your book.

With publication date growing closer, it is time to begin thinking about the mechanisms needed to consummate sales of your book. Special pre-publication discounts may be used to woo early birds. But whether it is pre-or-post-publication, if you are going to sell from your site, the mechanisms remain the same. (Of course, if you retain the services of a fulfillment house to receive orders, package and ship, none of this is necessary.)

Author's Resume— Introduce yourself to your surfers in simple direct terms with NO adjectives, just facts. The decision to include a photo is optional, but if you do, use one that tells a story. You are a writer. You should be seated at a desk, perhaps in front of a computer. If not, certainly with paper and pen in front of you.

Fiction lovers, as noted above, have a greater interest in learning about you. Nonfiction readers are far less concerned with your personal life than with your professional accomplishments. Give them adequate information to allow them to put their trust in you as an expert and in the information you give them.

Sales Tools—Most of you have purchased items on the Internet, and understand the functions of a “shopping cart,” which is in essence a list of the items you wish to purchase. Once completed, that step moves on to the payment cycle. There are a number of companies that provide carts and merchant payment programs.

It is not my intention to promote any single service. I suggest you click onto the major Internet search engines and enter either “shopping cart” and “online merchant accounts” to select the system you think will serve you best.

Driving Traffic to Your Site

It's certainly essential to include these systems and the information I have spoken about on your site, but if no one visits, it is meaningless. Therefore, you must use every means possible to bring readers to your site. The key is traffic, traffic, traffic.

Revamp your business and personal stationery to include your web site address. In the signature block of every e-mail, include a blurb about the site. You can do that very simply on AOL by clicking on "mail" in the top navigation bar and then click on "set mail signature."

You should also prepare a very portable handout. I like bookmarks and find so do the people I hand them to. Place a photo of your book cover on it, a short blurb about the book and a strong invitation to visit your web site. As soon as endorsements are available, reprint and include the best. Hand them out freely. The cost is minimal, but the response usually is substantial.

Search Engine Optimization

The entire question of keywords and linkage with other web sites is far too important to gloss over in just a paragraph or two. A detailed discussion of each will follow in later articles. Meanwhile be alert to the fact that incoming links are perhaps the most powerful tools available to attract visitors. But they must be from sites that are of quality equal to yours and cover similar subjects

Used with some care and some thought, a carefully designed web site can readily become the most powerful promotional tool in an author's war chest. Don't scrimp. Get the best designer you can afford.

While you should never get bogged down in the technology of the site, always keep an alert eye on whether or not your designer understands your needs as an author and fulfills them.