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Reprint

The Shopping Effect and Your Website

By Michael Stoner

When you develop strategy, content, and architecture for your website, keep the shopping effect in mind. What's the shopping effect? It's the phenomenon of virtual window-shopping—browsing on the Net before buying. It's important to recognize that the behavior of shoppers is now significantly influenced by the web, whether they buy online or on the ground.

Understanding this phenomenon can help you organize your website to help the shoppers who visit your website find the content they need to buy, apply, visit, donate, contact, or take other action.

Shopping in the network age

Think about buying a car today. Shoppers visit Edmunds.com to compare vehicles. Then they go to the websites of Toyota, Honda, Saturn, Audi, and other car manufacturers where they learn more about specific models. While they may not purchase online, shoppers frequently visit multiple websites multiple times before taking a test drive or making a purchase at a dealer.

How is that different from the way high school students and parents shop for a college education (or adults shop for graduate or professional school)?

Not much.

In making an initial selection, prospective students and parents perform searches on third-party sites like *U.S. News & World Report*. Their research is based on factors like majors, location of the institution, and other features (like whether they take courses online or after work). Then, they'll visit individual college websites to fill in the picture—which is why rich and timely content is critically important. While we don't know exactly what will catch a potential student's (or parent's) eye, we do know your website needs rich, compelling content: news stories and events information, course information, and other features. And it goes without saying that you need to make sure basic information is easy to find: too many sites make it impossible to discover important facts, like the price of tuition.

A word of caution: the impulse to be eye-catching can go too far, especially at the top levels of a website. On far too many college sites, Flash animations substitute for real content or sound information architecture. Many of these same websites make it difficult to find essential information or—they omit it altogether.

Let me say it once again: With limited staff resources and budgets, it's essential to focus on what people really need when they shop, not on elements that have little impact on the purchasing decision. Case in point: research shows that the website is only the second-most important source of information in the college shopping process—the first is the campus visit. You wouldn't buy a car without seeing how it handles in traffic, and most students—at least traditional age students—don't buy a college without doing an on-the-ground reality check. This ability to test-drive a potential choice is really important, as any admission officer knows. This suggests that online visiting information should be easy to find, easy to act on, and clear. Often it's not.

Shopping for donations

The shopping effect plays a major role in other important “purchasing” decisions as well. Take fundraising, for example.

Many nonprofits are alert to the realities of the shopping effect, but colleges and universities have done little to leverage their websites to communicate effectively with donors. Case in point: the websites of many major college and university campaigns are a joke—developed as afterthoughts to a print-based campaign communications plan. In contrast, nonprofits in other sectors have learned that websites can influence donors to make giving decisions and these nonprofits have invested considerable mindshare—and resources—on integrating the web into their fundraising efforts.

But, you say, online giving remains small across the board. That's true overall—though the Howard Dean presidential campaign certainly challenges the prevailing wisdom about online giving. It has been phenomenally successful at capturing online donations and utilizing the community-building capacity of the web.

In fact, there is some fascinating research that demonstrates just how important the web is—and confirms the shopping effect in action in philanthropy. Research by Network for Good, the Bridgespan Group, and Guidestar confirms that Internet users do indeed go online to gather information about causes and organizations they want to support—though they may act on this information off-line by advocating for a cause, writing a check, or volunteering.

This suggests that for many organizations, online giving per se isn't necessarily the ultimate goal of a website. Given the shopping effect, the objective instead is to facilitate online research about giving opportunities—to help shoppers find the most suitable investment for their philanthropic dollar and opportunities to engage. And, at a minimum, donors need to gain a clear sense of institutional needs and priorities and the outcomes of gifts from the website, and find out how they can take further action, either online or offline.

The take-away: whether you are trying to sell the value of an educational experience to prospective students or making a case for giving to donors, you neglect the shopping effect of the web at your peril.

1. Visually pleasing
2. Donate online
3. Memorable URL
4. Forum for discussion

In contrast, when nonprofit staff were asked to rank the same characteristics, there were some notable disconnects. For instance, nonprofit staff ranked "Info about how donations are spent" as 7th in importance, and ranked "visually pleasing" third. While nonprofit staff thought donating online was important, ranking it sixth, donors were much less interested in this feature, focusing more on information about the organization. [Source: Don Howard and Ken Weber, "Towards e- engagement: Nonprofits and individuals engaging online," 9 March 2003.]

There's a clear message here. Donors are using Google or an email link or other prompts to find your site, so don't worry so much about a clever URL for your giving pages. Once on the site, these visitors are very pragmatic in the way they use it. More than just an option for online giving, they want information about impact, they want it quickly, they want to get involved—either by doing something or, at least, by becoming a member.

I've long believed that donors use the information on your website to validate their giving decisions. They want to know that what they give you will make a difference for students, faculty, and other community members. It's up to you to provide the information they need to confirm their choice to invest in your institution.