Check your web site against these best practices

A healthy web site can yield healthy profits

by Phil Sasso

Have you given your web site a checkup lately? The health of your business can depend on the health of your web site. I recommend a routine annual checkup to keep your site healthy. Do more than half of your new customers come from the Internet? Consider a bi-annual checkup.

Why? Because more than half of prospects who research online will buy offline. It's important for these shoppers to quickly see the kind of work you do and the products and brands you carry. If your web site looks outdated or information is old or missing, you risk losing a prospective customer.

One of my restyling shop clients mentioned he used to get a lot of customers from the Yellow Pages but he's getting more and more from the Internet. After that comment, I made it a point to include his newest web site address in each of his four new Yellow Page ads. Then I suggested that we give his web site a quick check-up.

HERE'S PART OF MY WEB SITE CHECKUP CHECKLIST:

TAKE YOUR PULSE: The lifeblood of your web site traffic starts with your search engine rankings. Take a moment to check your rankings on the big three search engines (google.com, yahoo.com and msn.com).

DIAGNOSIS: Start by searching your shop's name and city (i.e. "Trucksessories, Timbuktu"). Does your shop come up on the first page? Next, try your keywords, city and state (i.e. truck caps, Toledo, Ohio). Are you on the first two pages here?

RX: If you rank well on the major search engines, you pass the test. If not, check that your company name, city, state and keywords are used throughout your web site. I once consulted with a client whose web site didn't appear on Google. I looked at his site and quickly realized the problem: Although the company name appeared on

every page, it was a graphic. Search engines can't *read* graphics. Adding the name and address in text to each page did the trick.

TAKE A BLOOD TEST: If the pulse of your site is search ranking, then the lifeblood is web site visitors. Check your log files. Didn't know you had log files? It's even more important to check them! Ask your web designer for help.

DIAGNOSIS: Your log files indicate the number of visitors by day, week and month. Are visits going up, down, or stagnant? Which pages get the most visits? The fewest? (Look at visits, not hits. *Visits* relate to people. *Hits* relate to data.)

RX: If fewer people are coming to your site this quarter than last quarter, do a quick analysis. Is that because it's off-season? Or is your site out of date? If it's not off-season, look at the next two items on this checklist.

CHECK YOUR REFLEXES: What are visitor's initial reactions to your site's content? It's hard to see your own web site objectively. Get an outside perspective. Ask a few friends or associates to look at your site. What's their initial response to the content and navigation? You don't want *attaboys*. You want constructive criticism.

Check your web site against these best practices

DIAGNOSIS: Is the information on your site complete and easy to understand? Are there mistakes and typos? Is it hard to quickly find information on your web site (navigate)?

RX: Schedule monthly or quarterly web site updates. Check your list of services, products and brands often. Add or delete information as needed. Keeping your site current will serve your customer better and can improve your search engine rankings.

DO A VISUAL EXAM: Look at the appearance of your site. Subtle and not-so-subtle visual clues tell customers if your site is current or outdated. Is the copyright on your site older than the average vehicle you service?

DIAGNOSIS: Does your site look old? Is the design dated? Are your vehicle photos ancient? Based on the web site, would you want to do business with your shop?

RX: If your site lacks recent photos, consider a tune up. If your site lacks entire sections (see sidebar, *Anatomy of a Web Site*) or was built before 2003, it's probably time for a complete overhaul.

OPEN YOUR MOUTH AND SAY AHHH: If your site falls short on these check points, it won't fix itself. Say something to the person responsible for your web site.

DIAGNOSIS: If you do your own web site, consider handing it off to someone else on staff. If someone else on your staff does it, consider hiring someone outside. If it's someone outside does it, consider a new web designer—or bring it back in-house!

RX: Open your mouth—and say something!

If you failed your checkup, don't feel badly. Very few restyling shops even do an annual web site review, so you're ahead of the crowd. It's easy to get wrapped up in the day-to-day work and lose site of marketing.

Failing a web site checkup isn't a problem. Failing to work on your web site after the checkup can be a problem.

Phil Sasso is president of Sasso Marketing Inc. (www.sassomarketing.com), an aftermarket advertising, public relations and web site design firm. Phil is also a speaker, trainer and consultant. And he's glad he chose a career in marketing over medicine. Sign up for his marketing blog at: philsasso.com/blog or email tips@shaboom.com.

ANATOMY OF A WEB SITE

Here are the sections that distinguish a good web site from an average one:

News
Current news will keep customers coming back to your shop. Put a news brief box on the home page with a link to a detailed news page.

Newsletter signup
Offer a free subscription to your email newsletter. Archive your old newsletters online. Don't have a newsletter? Start one!

Blog
Have strong opinions on products or trends? Create a blog. People read blogs. Search engines love blogs. Try it.

About us
Why should a customer choose your shop? Tell them your background, training/experience, awards, honors, etc. It's okay to brag a little online.

Contact us
Give your customers and prospects your mail, phone, or email. Put it in a footer of every page as well as the *Contact Us* page.

Map
Interactive maps like Google maps are great. They give prospects driving directions from their door to yours.
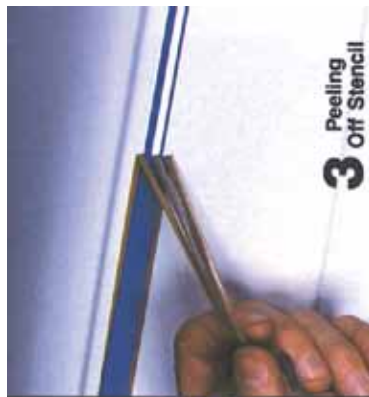
Photo gallery
A picture is worth 1,000 words. Show off your work. Enough said.

Site map
A site map can help prospects find their way if they get lost on your site.