



Are you making your customers stick?

By Thomas H. Davenport and Patrick D. Lynch

When the competition is only a click away, the key to success in eCommerce is to seize your customer's attention—and hold on to it. Here are four proven tactics for making your Web site sticky and keeping customers coming back for more.

In the ongoing quest for eCommerce success, the latest and best thing to be is *sticky*. A sticky site lures Web surfers, holds them and keeps them coming back for more. To be sure, stickiness does not guarantee success. But sites that are not sticky cannot possibly succeed, as Time Warner discovered with its failed Pathfinder venture. In other words, the stakes are high.

Stickiness is elusive and hard to define, however, and even more difficult to measure. The three most commonly cited measures of stickiness are the total time spent at a site, the number of visits per person and the number of pages viewed per person. Although portal sites like AOL.com and AT&T Worldnet Service are sticky by all three measures, other sites may be sticky by one measure and not sticky by another.

In fact, this is as it should be. Different measures of stickiness are appropriate under different circumstances, and companies need to determine

which stickiness metric is consistent with their business objectives. For example, news and information sites can charge high advertising rates if the numbers show that they keep viewers onsite longer than their competitors do. But for eCommerce sites, a high "time spent" score may mean that customers cannot easily find or buy what they want.

Winning combination

So by one measure or another, stickiness is critical. How do you achieve it? The stickiest sites skillfully use four tactics, which can be broadly defined as relevance, engagement, community and convenience. Just using one, two or even three will not do: The successful site will combine all four of these strategies to ensure stickiness.

Relevance

The most important questions in site design deal with the target audience and its expected needs: What readers do we want, and what do they want from us?

In the aftermath of the mysterious crash of TWA Flight 800, the airline quickly redesigned its Web site to give prominence to updates on the investigation. The company recognized that many of the visitors to its site—families of victims, the press and others—were visiting because they had an urgent need for information. User needs drove the design of the site. This is a principle honored by all of the stickiest sites on the Web: Deliver information, products and services that have real relevance to users.

Preparing content in the readers' native language is another way to achieve relevance. Sina.com has won accolades for providing the best Chinese-language content for customers in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and North America.

Some sites—AOL.com and Yahoo!, for example—achieve stickiness by maximizing breadth and depth. They are seeking to be relevant to the broadest possible audience. But some sticky

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sites define their audiences more narrowly and therefore are more selective about what they offer.

@Brint.com, an eBusiness and knowledge management portal, targets business researchers by offering ample depth, but not so much that users are lost in the data stream. Similarly, collectors who visit the auction site eBay will almost certainly find several specimens of whatever they are searching for, but not so many that the task of plowing through them becomes overwhelming.

Up to the minute

Things change quickly on the Web. User needs are not static. Information that is highly relevant today may be useless tomorrow. Frequent updates—including near real-time changes in stock prices—are the key to sticky success for the sites of financial services companies like MSN MoneyCentral and Charles Schwab in the United States; Britain's Interactive Investor International, which provides performance and price information for various investment vehicles; and ConSors,

a leading online discount broker in Germany.

Even on sites where visitors expect the bulk of the content to remain unchanged—Britannica.com, for example—they crave novelty and want a sense that the site is actively managed and the material is not obsolete. Britannica.com's editors accomplish this goal by constantly updating its home page with lists and reviews of Web sites, magazines and books.

Other sites promise a steady stream of benefits. The more-than-a-portal *Sole 24 Ore*, Web site for the Milan-based business daily, and SOL.no, a Norwegian portal site, create stickiness because each mouse click brings more news, more service and, at least theoretically, more value.

A reasonable way to ensure that a site is fulfilling user needs is simply to monitor activity on it, detect what features and content areas are proving stickiest and then build on those strengths. In other words, it makes

A stickiness checklist

Are you doing everything you can to lure customers to your Web site—and make sure they stay there (see story)? The stickiest sites fulfill four basic objectives, which are listed below, along with several ways to achieve each of those objectives.

Relevance

- Content that fulfills a need
- Appropriate scope
- Frequent updating
- Steady stream of benefits
- More of what customers want

Engagement

- Interactivity
- Competition
- Entertainment
- Narrative
- Production values

Community

- Sense of ownership/belonging
- Personalization and customization
- Co-creation
- Flattery and recognition

Convenience

- Quick downloads
- Intuitive navigation
- Bite-size chunks of information
- Minimal distractions

sense simply to give people more of what they want most.

The approach has one big risk, however: It can further skew the performance of a site toward the needs of just one constituency—and alienate important visitors who find little of use during their first look at the site.

The stickiest sites are also authoritative—or at least claim to be, using time-honored techniques to establish their credentials with users. Amazon.com now boasts the “Earth’s biggest selection” of goods, Fast Search claims to be the “world’s biggest, fastest search engine,” and Shareware Music Machine touts itself as the “world’s biggest music software site.” Meanwhile, 1-Jobs.com calls itself the “fastest-growing Internet recruiting service” and business research portal Intellifact.com claims that you can “always find it at Intellifact.com.”

Sneaker.com uses online question-and-answer sessions with professional runners to position itself as an authoritative source. Computer and electronics vendor CNET.com creates an aura of credibility by bestowing an Editors’ Choice award on certain vendors, noting them with an icon of a yellow box with a red arrow pointing into it.

Engagement

Relevance alone may not be enough to make a site sticky. With more than one billion pages on the Web, surfers can probably find relevance in more than one place. No subject is so specialized that it enjoys a monopoly; even a search for the ancient Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* turns up several sites, some with audio files of original-language readings.

The stickiest sites also succeed in engaging their audience. One proven

tool for engagement is interactivity. Some measure of interactivity comes with the Web territory, of course, since visitors have to keep clicking the mouse to keep pages coming. But many sites have taken interactivity a step or two farther.

Take the Post & Riposte feature on *Atlantic Unbound*, the online sister of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Readers can post their reactions to the magazine’s electronic and print articles on the site’s message board, which they can later revisit to see what other readers posted in response. All of that time online makes this a sticky site. Similar comment/response features are used by the *Harvard Business Review*, CNN.com and Epinions.com.

Fun and games

Competition is an especially sticky form of engagement, and not just for sites whose main purpose is online gaming (although Gamesville.com and Uproar.com—both of which feature real-time cards, bingo and trivia games, all with real money on the virtual table—are among the stickiest Web sites).

Many nongaming sites now feature various forms of competition to encourage people to linger. Disney.com offers users several different games, and Britain’s sports-oriented Football365.com features trivia quizzes and arcade-style games that cater to the sports fan’s sense of competition.

Production values make their own statement, particularly today, when images often trump words. Faced with a multitude of competing sites, visitors often discriminate on the basis of what they see. The British clothing vendor Racing Green, for example, goes to great lengths to make its Web site look and feel like a high-quality catalog.

At the highest level of production quality, one may wonder whether technology begins to blur the line between information delivery and entertainment, though that is not necessarily a bad thing. Boo.com, a casual-apparel site headquartered in London, entertains shoppers with virtual mannequins that rotate in real time to give the customer a 360-degree view of everything from footwear to swimming suits. If that’s not enough, Miss Boo, a 3-D animated guide, offers running commentary as you navigate the site.

Indeed, entertainment like this can keep people online for hours in much the same way it can retain viewers’ attention during television commercials. No wonder animation and audiovisual clips are used to liven up even the most staid corporate sites.

Narrative is an especially memorable way to present messages and engage visitors. Some sites get their narrative content from users, as in the publication of members’ Birth Stories on Parent Soup. Few sites offer original narrative content, but as bandwidth to homes and businesses increases, people may submit digitized video commentary and advice that will play like cinematic dramas scrolling across Web screens.

Then there’s DotComGuy. This is a real person who took up residence in an empty house at an undisclosed location in the United States on January 1 and set out to prove that he could live for one year entirely on what he could buy online; his stay is being chronicled by cameras 24 hours a day. eCommerce vendors—including Mall.com, Borders.com, PSMG, UPS.com, Fitlinxx and Net.B@nk—provide him with products and services in return for privileged mention on his Web site and the right to call themselves DotComGuy sponsors. The site may

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prove to be as sticky as daytime TV soap operas.

Community

Web designers use a number of devices to give users a strong sense of belonging and ownership that keeps them coming back to the site. For example, co-creation—in which users make a substantial investment of their own information to build the site’s content—is the main force behind the stickiness of investment sites like Fidelity Investments and Charles Schwab. Internet calendars available on sites like When.com also depend on co-creation. (For a related article, see “Co-creation: A new source of value,” *Outlook*, Vol. XI, No. 2, June 1999.)

So does any site that makes heavy use of online discussion. A good example of a site that recently added a co-creation feature to increase stickiness is My Health Records on iVillage.com, which enables users to create personalized, confidential medical histories

online. Co-creation is also a key to the stickiness of Blue Mountain Arts, which allows a well-wisher to add a personal sentiment—as personal as one’s own recorded voice—to an online greeting card.

What do all of these sites have in common? In every case, user-provided content makes them more useful and harder to abandon—in other words, reliably sticky.

Customization is a form of co-creation, but it usually depends more on filtering and manipulation than on the addition of information by the user. For example, MyYahoo! allows users to put whatever news most interests them at the top of the page. In the business-to-business sector, Dell’s Premier Pages employs customization by enabling corporate customers to exclude information not relevant to their account.

Getting personal

Starbucks.com and Buy.com are good examples of sites employing personal-

Stickiness objectives and measures

Companies need to determine which stickiness metric is consistent with their business objectives.

Type of site	Stickiness objective	Suitable measure
Informational	Long stays for advertising impact	Total time spent
Commercial	Quick, easy transactions; view multiple offerings	Visits per person Pages per person
Portal	Offer breadth; keep user within site; become home page	Pages per person Total time spent Visits per person
Software download	Convenient, quick downloads; customer service on Web	Visits per person Pages per person
Entertainment	Long stays for advertising; high numbers of users for network effects	Total time spent Unique visitors

ization, beginning at the sign-on when registered viewers are welcomed by name. At a deeper level, these sites target previous customers individually by providing gift registry and matching solutions for friends and family. Follow-up e-mail concerning purchases from these companies is also personalized; without this personalization, customers would probably delete the e-mail as junk. Preview Travel uses a similar approach to sell travel services, with personalized recommendations based on the customer's prior travel patterns.

Amazon.com's reliance on reader-submitted reviews is often touted as an example of co-creation. But the stickiness impact of this tactic may, in fact, have more to do with the flattery and recognition of the reader doing the posting.

A sense of community can be a powerful stickiness builder and an effective marketing advantage. The sports fans who populate sites like NFL.com, NBA.com and NHL.com show their commitment to community by wearing team-logo merchandise and using affinity credit cards emblazoned with their favorite teams' logos, available through the site.

Soccer fans may not consider a visit to the official Web site for Manchester United complete without a click to enjoy the shopping experience at the British team's online Megastore. Beansprout.com brings childcare professionals, physicians and referral agencies to the screens of a virtual community of families.

Convenience

Surveys of Internet users suggest that faster access would be the single most effective way to increase usage. One implication of this finding is that multiple formats and complex technologies for playing sound and video over

the Web may, in fact, have a real downside. Though they do help to draw attention to a site, such bells and whistles may frustrate visitors who quickly tire of waiting for sound and video to load when all they really want is rapid access to information. Recognizing this risk, many sites offer visitors an option to view their pages without animation and sound.

Intuitive navigation helps make sites more convenient; so does the delivery of content in digestible chunks. Thanks to *USA Today's* long experience in print, *USATODAY.com* is a model of the bite-size presentation. The UK-based consumer and home products vendor Argos forgoes banner ads in favor of graphics that quickly bring a visitor to the store's products.

Stickiness is not a product of the Internet age; television and radio have long been at least as concerned with audience retention. But the Internet is not a passive medium—people must click and click to keep the content flowing. When it is just as much work for a user to stay with you as leave you, the pressure is on to deliver results.

That's why stickiness matters—and why a successful retention strategy will involve some form of all four of these tactics. Competitors are bound to be racing right now to make their sites more relevant, engaging and easier to use, or to build a stronger sense of ownership and belonging between the user and their sites.

In a world where attention is one of the scarcest resources, and attention retention is a key to success, experience shows that these tactics work. ■



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