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Electronics & High Tech
How effective is your corporate website . . . really?

By Mattias Lewrén, Rana Mitra and Agneta Björnsjö

In the Digital Age, the ways that companies engage consumers and influence their purchasing decisions are increasingly varied and complex. Online channels have made an almost limitless source of product and pricing information instantly available, and social media platforms enable consumers to share experiences well out of the control of a company's marketing organization. Consumers are also savvy enough to use multiple channels, both online and offline, to their advantage—often researching a product online and then buying it at the store, where they can see and touch the physical product.

In spite of the growing complexity of digital channels, the role of the corporate website remains of utmost importance. The messaging is under the company's watchful eye, and content can be offered in various ways, thanks to the relative richness of online media; this makes the corporate website an important hub for all digital interaction, as well as a key research destination for potential customers. A 2013 IDC survey of chief marketing officers in

technology companies found that CMOs regard the company website as the most important area for digital marketing. More than 60 percent of respondents expected that investments in website content and development would increase.[1]

But how effective are corporate websites in engaging consumers—not just providing information but also stimulating a purchasing decision and, beyond that, building longer-term relationships?

Using a proprietary methodology,[2] Accenture analyzed the websites of 15 leading consumer electronics companies, assessing their effectiveness in delivering a successful digital customer experience. The study focused on the US market, the largest online retail market in the world. The companies studied included manufacturers of smartphones, laptops/PCs and televisions.

Although several top performers emerged from the evaluation, the spread in peer-set

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[1] ©Copyright 2013 IDC. Source: IDC 2013 Tech Marketing Barometer: Trends, Forecast, and Essential Guidance for Tech Marketing Executives, Doc #240712, April 2013.
[2] The Accenture Web Evaluator (AWE) methodology was used to conduct the performance assessment. The approach is a manual (non-technology based) analysis of the site from the user's perspective rather than an assessment of the infrastructure or platform.

performance for the most important factors in customer interaction and influence—relationship building, information and commerce—was broad, with some companies scoring very low.

The Accenture analysis underscores how important it is for CMOs to re-evaluate the performance of their corporate websites within their overall multichannel strategy for engaging digital consumers.

Key performance factors for corporate websites

All digital roads eventually pass through a company's website; though no longer the exclusive source of product information and customer interaction, it is a critically important one. Our study evaluated consumer electronics companies' US websites across seven performance factors:

Navigation: Can consumers find what they are looking for? Equally important, does the navigation deepen people's experience of a company? Are there intuitive routes through the content, with effective menus and site searches, as well as clear and vivid page layouts?

Customer service: Does the site offer clear routes to access information about product support or reach live service, as well as self-help features? Is there effective self-help? Are there multiple feedback points?

Branding: How well does the company use its website to establish trust and "likeability"? Is the message clear? Are the tone and overall corporate profile appropriate to the brand image?

Information: Can users make an informed decision about products? Does the site enable ready selection and comparison, providing not only practical product information but also independent opinions from third parties and other customers?

Relationship building: Does the website make a compelling case for customers to return? Are there rewards for providing information through registration? Are users given continuous, relevant, personalized experiences across devices and channels?

Commerce: How easily can consumers actually make a purchase? Is the sequence of steps clear and secure? Does the site present pricing information and product availability?

Communities: Does the website promote participation in onsite communities? Is there integration with social functionality?

Room for improvement

Three of the performance factors evaluated proved to be especially important in how the best companies drive commerce through their websites:

1. Information: Enabling decision making. We found that several of the sites did not include user-friendly language and labeling. Some sites did not allow users to easily identify the products that match their needs, and the paths to those products were not always clear. Item details, including pictures, often did not address the practical aspects that users need to know about those products to make an informed purchasing decision. Stock availability and pricing information were often not present, which could send consumers to a competitor's site.

2. Commerce: Enabling ready purchasing. The best brands present their users with multiple informative and easy-to-use channels for "conversion" (that is, moving the consumer to a purchasing decision). A growing trend for consumer electronics brands is to enable a purchase directly from their website, but this capability was more prominent in some product categories than in others. For example, all of the laptop/PC brands allowed direct online purchase, compared with only two of seven smartphone manufacturers.

3. Relationship building: Enabling repeat customers. Many brands do not take advantage of the considerable relationship-building opportunities that a website represents. For example, customer registration was not effectively promoted by most of the websites studied. The leading sites (such as Apple) leverage a single sign-on registration feature across all digital touchpoints, which creates more relevant and meaningful experiences for users and provides the company with a consolidated view of a customer's transactions and overall relationship.

What the best do best

Based on the website evaluation, several companies emerged as best in class: Apple for overall brand experience and leader in the smartphone category; Samsung as the leader in TVs; and Dell as the best performing PC brand.

The common denominator for these three companies is their superior capabilities in using their websites for relationship building. All of them are also slightly ahead of their peers in the areas of information and commerce. Their websites offer distinct product information, a range of customization options, a smooth online purchase experience and extensive two-way support.

The Apple site, for example, delivers an engaging, service-oriented experience with simple navigation and an efficient support and purchasing process. Samsung offers a streamlined commerce solution, unique among the TV vendors studied; its interactive promotion and support effectively stimulates purchasing. Dell uses a distinct product information, selection and customization tool and offers an online community for self-help with a two-way feedback loop.

For consumer electronics companies in both mature and emerging markets, the corporate website remains a key aspect of an overall customer interaction strategy. Yet companies' sites vary widely in terms of how effective they are in building relationships and stimulating sales growth.

Given the fact that websites are by their nature a public presence—meaning that companies have ready access by which to understand and analyze their competitors—the gap between the leaders and the rest of the pack is somewhat surprising. On the other hand, the fact that the gap in many areas is substantial provides a great strategic opportunity for underperformers to rapidly catch up.

The best practices in using a website to deliver an engaging consumer experience are known, the path to implement them understood and the business imperative clear.