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The Web is becoming the place to
create your own stories. Are you in?

OBSERVATIONS

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A Journal Of Things We Find Interesting

Do-It-Yourself Online Marketing

You get an email greeting card with a folded-up sheet of "paper" and a pair of "scissors" driven by your mouse. Using the scissors to snip and trim, you create your own snowflake, click a button and --voila -- you see your unique design. Then it joins others falling gently into a snowbank.

Cool, huh? It gets better. The story of this interactive Web activity comes from Paul Frett of PopularFront.com. The snowflake idea was a self-promotion, holiday greeting sent to about 300 people a little over two years ago.

Some of those 300 sent it to their friends. Others figured out how to add messages to the snowflakes and sent them to other friends. Informal groups of "flakers" started appearing. There's a Yahoo chat room dedicated to the monitoring flaker activity. Troops in Iraq send snowflakes back home during the holidays.

The site now attracts over 2.7 million visitors from all over the world and generates at least a couple juicy RFPs for PopularFront every month.

"Snowflakes" is just one of the indicators that activity on the Web is taking a distinctive character. It's all about interactivity.

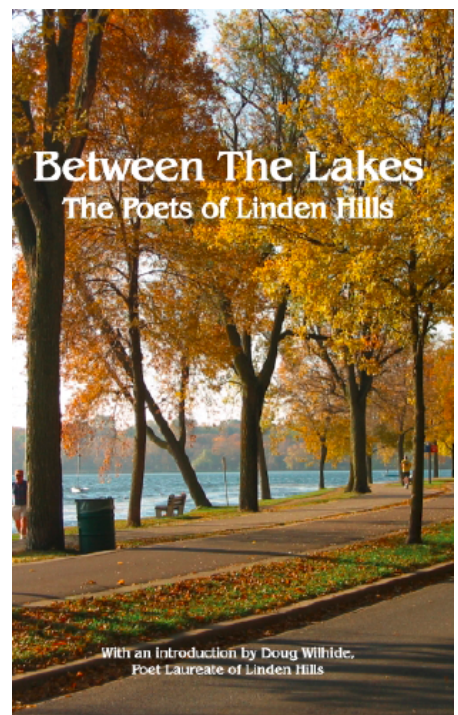
And it's all about you -- sometimes literally. "Groovy Girls," another PopularFront-created site, is a destination site for young girls sponsored by a company that makes dolls and accessories. You create a character and log on with your alias. Then you choose your outfit, hairstyle, etc., decorate your room, go to a dance, or just hang out. Other characters join you

AVAILABLE NOW!

Along with doing ad campaigns, creating direct mail packages, writing brochures, consulting and teaching creative strategy to graduate business students... I write poetry. In fact, I'm the Poet Laureate of Linden Hills.

We've just published a book featuring 75 poems by 11 local poets. This is poetry that will make you laugh, make you think, break your heart and give you hope.

If you like poetry, you'll enjoy this collection. If you're looking for a thoughtful, intelligent gift, this is it. If you know someone who would like a souvenir of the lakes area of Minneapolis, here it is. To order, call me or email: wilhide@skypoint.com.



from around the world and you can engage in a text-messaging-style exchange. Everything is carefully protected by security protocols and there is no sales message, but the accessories are those sold by Groovy Girls.

This site also grew exponentially. The only promotion was tags attached to the dolls in retail stores, but in less than a year the site was attracting over 3 million visitors, many of them repeat users. It built a solid buzz of brand awareness for Groovy Girls much faster and cheaper than other media could have.

"Consumers are social. Shopping is a social activity. Social networking is what the Web is all about," says Frett. He thinks the key is leveraging the Web as

a media channel that lets people create their own content -- and their own story -- when and where they want to.

Creating your own story on an interactive Web site is gaining traction. Motor Trend's site features video windows that put you in the driver's seat for test drives of half a dozen vehicles. Major League Baseball's site lets you select video clips of highlights from the previous day's games.

And Chevrolet even has a feature that lets you assemble your own TV commercial for the Tahoe. You select from a series of video clips, add a soundtrack, copy and a voiceover, tag it with a logo and --voila! (again) -- you have what looks like a real Chevy spot.

Frett argues that we should think of the Web the same way as we used to think of newspapers and then radio and then TV. He espouses a "web-centric, integrated media" strategy, where Web sites drive other media choices, not vice versa.

I tend to agree. More and more people are going to the Web for information about everything from politics to purchases. And it's true of all demographic groups: the over 55 group is the fastest growing user segment and minorities are right behind.

What people really want when they go to a Web site is the ability to participate.

Every performer knows that if you can get the audience to sing along you'll get bigger applause. If you can engage a class in a participatory activity they'll sit up and pay attention. Workshops integrated into seminars are much more effective in terms of interest and retention. "The ego of authorship" needs to be a part of our marketing thinking. It's not just your story that you need to be telling now. It's giving your customers permission to create their own stories and link them to your brand.

That takes a customer-focused approach, real empathy with the audience and a level of fun and creativity that is too often missing from both advertising and marketing communications.

There are other hesitations. Measurement is one of them. It takes a leap of faith to create a site that is attractive to visitors but doesn't engage in selling until the visitor is ready. A couple of student presentations in my St. Thomas graduate class showed just how complicated measuring the value of Web activity can be.

There are four basic ways to do it. You can create a "hierarchy" of traffic by measuring the number of hits, unique and repeat visitors. You can measure "technical" information like geography and source (browser links) and adapt your technology to the lowest significant common denominator. (Internet Explorer accounts for about 85% of Web traffic; Netscape 7+ is about 4% -- older Netscape versions are quickly dying; Firefox accounts for about 7%).

Observations is an occasional publication we put out when we feel like it. We provide creative services and consulting for marketing communications. If you have a project we could help with, please contact us. If you'd just like to shoot the breeze about some of this stuff, we usually have time for that too.

Doug and Jean Wilhide

You can measure "behaviors" -- scenario analyses that show how people navigate your site, where they drop off, where they linger, etc. And you can measure "marketing" metrics: advertising that drives people to the Web, keywords, banner ads, etc. -- then track ROI from Web visits that lead to sales.

Measuring CPM for a Web site is fairly useless because it isn't the same for CPM with print and radio/TV data. Measuring CPC (cost per click) is better, but still shaky -- there are too many variables about what constitutes a click. Also, the value of clicks is declining. Click-through rates declined from 3% to 2.6% between 2004 and 2005, and the CPC at Google increased from \$1.29 to \$1.61 during the same period.

Another problem is marketing organization and process. Too many marketers are still operating in a fantasy world of silos, where Web activity is consigned to one place and everything else gets done in another. Even if you do collect the data, it doesn't get analyzed effectively, it doesn't get seen by the right people or it doesn't get translated into action. Often it's all of these.

There are some exceptions. Best Buy has been known to change its online offers within 24 hours when results indicate a need. J.C. Penney recently opened a shop in New York where nothing is for sale. But customers can browse in a retail environment then go to a computer to order online. In some cases, your purchase will be waiting for you when you get home. It's a nice integration of media and a trendy update on the old Penney's catalog stores.

The leading cellphone supplier in Europe, where the market is near saturation, gained significant market share by offering free coupons to Wednesday

night movies. Wednesday went from the worst movie day to one of the best in about 6 weeks.

Technology, as usual, is another hurdle. What you should be able to do and what you actually can do are sometimes miles apart. Downloading those interactive video sites, for instance, is fairly easy if you're at work and on a fast T-1 line. But if you're at home, even working with broadband DSL capability, the time delays can negate the fun and games.

Still, this is the future. Interactivity that lets Web visitors create their own story makes sense for a lot of good reasons. So does media integration, with the Web site as the cornerstone. So does finding ways to get your message out on everything from desktop screens to cell phones. And one student argued that the next step is "collaborative content" creation, where customers will become full participants in designing new products.

We used to stay, "stay tuned;" we now must say, "stay on line."

On Branding

Is brand loyalty still a viable concept? According to Frank Reicheld's "The Loyalty Effect," U.S. corporations lose half their customers every 5 years, half their employees every 4 years and half their investors every year.

According to a recent DDB study, the likelihood that people in the 20-29 demographic will stick with a brand has declined from 66% to 58% since 2000. With the over 75 age group the decline was from 69% to 60%.

How important is "buzz" and "viral marketing?" Credibility for word-of-mouth recommendations is about 90%. Credibility for messages in ads is just under 30%.

My recommendation: Make your brand mean something valuable to your customer. The most valuable thing you can have is the belief that your story and your customers' stories are related. That has to be true... and it has to be communicated frequently, authentically and through a wide variety of media channels.

Looking for a state-of-the-art Web site?

Ours is NOT it. The spirit is willing but the techno savvy is lacking. Still, if you do marketing, you'll find useful information. I've updated the site to include recent articles and it contains links to pdfs of the last few years of this newsletter. Check it out.

www.wilhide.com

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