

Building a Strong Internet Presence

Do you have a website? If so, is it generating leads, phone inquiries, and customers for your clinic or salon? If you're like many beauty professionals, you may have hastily constructed your website and then promptly forgot about it. One of your most valuable marketing assets, now relegated to the back burner, becomes just another business disbursement.

If your website hasn't measured up to your expectations, take heart. By following a relatively simple methodology, you can turn your website into a profit center. The steps are:

- Drive visitors to your website
- Provide the information visitors are looking for
- Capture leads and information
- Create site "stickiness" or repeat traffic
- Convert prospects into customers

Before discussing these steps, let's review the reasons why you need a website and some interesting demographics that impact your business.

Why You Need a Website

In this day and age, a website is no longer an option; it's a business necessity. As personal care providers, estheticians and beauty professionals stand the most to gain from a strong Internet presence.

Esthetics is a nurturing field where customer relationship is paramount to success. During the course of a treatment, you both literally and figuratively, touch your client's life. You build strong, personal affiliations by listening and providing expert skincare advice.

As caring professionals, you should strive to maintain that special connection - even after customers have left your clinic. There is no better way to do that than utilizing the web. The Internet provides you with a low cost, effective means to interact and communicate with customers.

Internet Demographics That Affect Your Business

63% of Americans have Internet access either at work or at home. According to a recent "Trends 2005" report published by Pew Internet Project (PIP), on a typical day approximately 70 million American adults use the Internet (37% increase from 2000). Email is the No.1 activity online, followed by information search, entertainment, and e-commerce. (*Internet: The Mainstreaming of Online Life/2005*)

According to the PIP study, 95% of females interviewed say they use email and that it plays a role in improving relationships. Furthermore:

- 78% of Internet users are between 18-29
- 74% of Internet users are between 30-49
- 88% of Internet users have college degrees
- 89% of Internet users earn more than \$75,000

According to Shop.org, "the percentage of Internet users in the US with household income exceeding \$150,000 will increase from about 8.6 million in 2004 to over 10.3 million in 2005, a change of 19.8%. (Nielsen/NetRatings, 02/2005)"

A March 2005 report, released by BIGresearch, states that 74% of US consumers (both men and women) use the Internet to conduct product research before making offline purchases.

What does all that mean for your business? Simply put, it means that today's consumer is sophisticated and seeks out pertinent information about products and services before making purchasing decisions. Heaviest Internet use is driven by well educated individuals earning more than \$75,000 yearly. With discretionary income to spend, these individuals represent your ideal target market.

Business Benefits

With a properly executed plan, your website will build your brand and expand your market reach at a fraction of the cost of traditional print media. A whole year of web hosting is generally less than one advertisement in your local newspaper. Unlike print media, your website affords you unlimited space to differentiate yourself from the competition and communicate with website visitors. That's just the beginning. Use your website to:

- Generate leads
- Acquire customers
- Increase sales
- Disseminate product and service information
- Promote new service offerings
- Build trust
- Establish strong relationships with customers and prospects
- Provide customer support
- Improve customer loyalty

Each day, millions of people (a.k.a. potential customers) are searching for information about your products and services. According to Yahoo! Search Marketing Solutions, in January 2005, there were 637,741 searches for the keywords: skin care, facials, cosmetics, and day spa. Those four keywords represent a fraction of the possible combinations of terms that users type into their browser when searching for information about skin care.

Few beauty professionals have optimized their websites to capture this market. Test it yourself on Yahoo! or Google using keyword phrases such as "skin care treatment Hartford" and "skin care services Wichita." Substitute different cities and towns and look at the results. Almost without exception, estheticians, skin care clinics, and salons are scarcely found on the first page. What does this mean to you, the esthetician? It means that the Internet market for local search terms is relatively wide open and untapped - waiting to be exploited.

Step 1: Drive Visitors to Your Website

Remember the famous line from Field of Dreams, "If you build it, they will come"? Well, that works in movies, but not real life. Building a website doesn't guarantee visitors. Driving traffic to your site requires a combination of online and offline measures. Here's a list of steps you can take to drive traffic to your site:

- **Include your web address on printed media.** This means all business cards, stationary, direct mail, newspaper and magazine ads, yellow page ads, etc.
- **Submit your website to search engines, directories, and industry specific directories.** Your website benefits from quality incoming links.

- **Optimize your site for search engines.** Set up your pages so that visitors and search engines can find you among the millions out there. Use relevant keywords on your pages and in your meta tags.
- **Use paid advertising.** Base these pay-per-click ads on relevant keywords related to your business. Consider ads on local sites such as the online version of your newspaper.
- **Link to non-competing beauty industry sites.** Encourage them to link back to your site. You gain search engine visibility if you have quality incoming links.
- **Add your signature file to all electronic correspondence.** Every time you send an outgoing mail, use your signature file.

Step 2: Provide Relevant Information

Once people get to your website, you've only got a few seconds to capture their attention and make a good impression. If your website is slow to download, cluttered, or not logically laid out, people will simply click away.

Make sure the information they're searching for can easily be found. Keep the navigation simple and don't make them click too many times. Update your content by publishing informative skin care articles and useful tips. Wow them with your knowledge. That's the first and most important step to gain credibility. If writing is not one of your strong points, employ a professional to edit your web copy.

Step3: Use Your Website to Capture Leads

Once visitors have arrived at your site, do your best to capture some information about them, even if it's just an email address. Lead your customers toward the "most desired action" such as a signing up for your newsletter, downloading your service menu, printing a coupon, or completing a survey. Be creative. Remember you *must* provide something of value to them in exchange for their information. If there is no perceived value, they have nothing to gain by giving you their personal information.

Each website visitor represents a qualified lead, someone who is actively looking for information about your business. They went to some effort to find you by either typing in your URL or performing a search. That makes them a highly qualified prospect and as such, they deserve your attention.

Think of it this way. If someone calls about your services, you try to get contact information so you can send them brochures and marketing material. Your website is an extension of this process but on a much larger scale. It operates as a 24/7 virtual business tool capable of interacting with visitors and exchanging valuable information.

Step 4: Create "Stickiness" (Repeat Traffic)

Give your customers a reason to visit your website often. Accomplish this by frequently updating promotions and adding fresh content to your site. Use your electronic newsletter to lead prospects and customers back to your website where they'll find your latest articles and information about new products and service offerings.

Step 5: Convert Prospects into Customers Using Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing is a means for you to engage in two-way communication with prospects and customers. It involves personalizing your marketing communications to deliver meaningful information to interested recipients. Think of it as an ongoing process for you to gain customer insight, trust and loyalty. Your website and subsequent email communications, provides a low

cost means for you to accomplish this goal. Targeted email communications will save you thousands of dollars each year on printing and distribution costs.

Treat your website visitors as you would your best customers. Having collected their information, start to nurture a relationship with them. Send them a welcoming email along with the information you promised. Use periodic mailings to grow and retain your customer base. View each email campaign as a valuable touch point in the customer lifecycle. Each marketing message should build the relationship, demonstrate your expertise, and foster trust.

Whenever possible, try to get additional information so you can further segment your list. Keep in mind that data collection is sensitive and should be handled in a secure, unobtrusive manner. A little information related to age, interests, or skin conditions will go a long way in creating highly targeted mailings. For instance, a newsletter about teenage acne will go unopened by a senior citizen. Don't risk tarnishing your reputation by sending email not closely aligned with the recipient's needs or interests.

Use your newsletters to showcase your knowledge and expertise. Don't deluge your prospects and customers with dribble. Each email message should move you a step closer to a meaningful and profitable relationship.

Without a doubt, the Internet has reshaped our lives and how we do business. The web has leveled the playing field between larger, well established day spas and smaller salons and skin clinics. If you haven't already done so, the time is ripe to tap into the efficiencies of the web and expand your market reach.

There is a virtual explosion of information out there. Some sources are good, some not so good. As skin care experts, you can and should become *the* trusted source of information for your customers.

Building a strong Internet presence is a gradual process that takes time and energy. Be patient. You'll be rewarded with increased sales, more clients, and greater customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Is the Internet right for your business? If your goal is to attract and retain dedicated customers, the answer is a resounding yes.