

Joan Holman: Joan Holman Productions

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“You need an information-rich web site and a web site that responds to [customer] needs, whatever they are.”

—Joan Holman

A business' presence on the Internet isn't the result of just one or two things; it's a combination of everything the business does or doesn't do online. No one knows this better than Joan Holman, who brings a holistic approach to web marketing.

Joan is that rare consultant without a specialty. She's a broad-based marketing consultant whose expert-

ise includes marketing, business development, branding, and public relations. But online marketing isn't the only thing Joan does—she also created and produced the PBS documentary *The Legacy of Achievement*, founded The Legacy of Achievement Foundation to document the lives of successful and inspiring people, and wrote the biographical book *Hands That Touch, Hands That Heal* (Sister Rosalind Christian Ministries, 2003). Not surprisingly, Joan is also an in-demand motivational speaker.

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Improving a Company's Web Presence

By looking at all aspects of a company's web presence, Joan Holman is about to offer advice that other narrowly focused consultants might miss. In this interview she discusses everything from web site design to the use of humor online—and why you don't want the artists or the geeks driving how your web site looks.

How has the whole concept of marketing changed with the advent of the online world?

We are having a convergence of public relations and marketing online. You are able to bypass gatekeepers. You can go direct to the public now, direct to the consumer. It used to be that you'd have to use advertising, you'd have to use the media, to get your message out. The Internet allows you to bypass all these people who have been in control before. If you are creative and if you understand the medium, or if you have somebody working with you who does, there are powerful things that you can do for yourself with marketing—for a fraction of the cost of what it used to take to build a brand or become a celebrity. It's just amazing, the opportunities that are there for people who know how to do this.

“You need to get feedback from your target market.”

There are some people who've been very, very effective with this, like Dane Cook, the comedian. In the year 2000, he took \$30,000 of his own money and he launched his web site (www.danecook.com) to further his career. He had been on Comedy Central and he had a fan base, but he understood the power of the Internet. He became one of the first celebrities to really harness the Internet to catapult himself to a much greater degree of success. He was the first person to get two million fans on MySpace, listed as his friends. So when he came out with tickets to his events, and with products—DVDs, CDs—there he was, in instant contact with a worldwide audience who could come buy his stuff and support him. Things like that were not possible before we had the Internet.

Can you talk a bit about how a company might use the Internet to go directly to their customers?

You are probably aware of PR Web (www.prweb.com), where you can post your direct-to-consumer, direct-to-public news releases. Those news releases get permanently archived online. You can select target markets for your releases and it's a great way to get information out there, to get your name out there, and to have visibility online.

As far as reaching your existing customers, you need an information-rich web site and a web site that responds to their needs, whatever they are. If they want to buy online or get customer service or read frequently asked questions, then you set that up for them. People are also going to do their

research for their product purchases online and you need to help them with that process.

A lot of the big corporations have used advertising agencies and people with an advertising agency consciousness to create web sites that are based on traditional broadcast television advertising. They have tried to take TV advertising and put that online. But that is not what is really effective online. What is effective online is great content and authentic information. That's why people will go to consumer sites, to actually see product reviews, rather than go to a large corporate web site, which they may not trust to give them the real picture.

It's very important for a company to monitor what is being said online about their products and services, about their brand. It's important to be on top of that and be responsive. When appropriate, a company may open up its own web site for some honest dialogue and interactivity with its customer base, in order to respond to customer needs and to improve its products and services.

So if a company already has a web site, what would they look for in trying to improve that site, with online marketing in mind?

First of all, they should conduct some sort of usability testing. Extensive usability testing can be very expensive, but you can do some limited or informal usability testing on a small budget. You need to get feedback from your target market and also find out who is coming to your web site and what is their experience of your web site.

I personally have seen so many web sites that do not function well for their target audiences. I recently evaluated a web site of a real estate developer who is building expensive condos and much of his target market is an older population. My recommendation to him, or to anyone building a web site, is to know what kinds of computer platforms his prospective buyers are using and how this impacts the usability of his web site. His home page and much of the web site was created in Flash—and to view it, you must have the latest version of Flash. This could be a major problem with an older population,

“What are these people working with and how can we make our web site user-friendly for them?”

which may not have the latest and greatest technology. One solution is to provide an alternative version of specific web pages, or even the entire web site, for those people who do not have the most current version of Flash.

According to research from early 2007 by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 71 percent of American adults are now online. Internet users access the web from all kinds of computers, devices, monitors, browsers, and connection speeds, which impacts how they can view or use any given web site. Although high-speed Internet is pervasive in the workplace, Pew research indicates that as of early 2007, only about half of U.S. adults had high-speed connections at home. And there's a lot of businesses creating web sites that try to force their customers and prospective customers to adapt to the parameters of the web site—instead of saying, “What are these people working with and how can we make our web site user-friendly for them?” These businesses don't have the knowledge of all the technicalities of the web, the different platforms, and they don't understand what it takes to create a truly effective and usable web site. They may get a phone call one day from someone who says, “I can't use your web site.” Then the assumption is made that, well, there's something wrong with that person's computer, and that just may not be the case. It just may be that the user is on a platform that limits the use of the web site. Some people, because of security issues, won't allow ActiveX or pop-up windows. So they're screening out a lot of stuff that you want them to view and you may not even be aware of this. If you want to be effective, you need to know what's really going on with your web site and you need to develop a web site that is usable for your target audience.

Why do you think companies create bad web sites? Like you, I see a lot of these web sites using Flash and other technologies that aren't going to be visible on some people's computers. Why do companies gravitate towards that?

Well, because of the people developing the web site. Mostly these are young techie people and this is what they're being trained in. They're either taking courses in it or they're self training, and this is what's fun for them. This is what's trendy and cool, and since they are techies, they love technology and want to use it. Quite frankly, they're not marketing people. So many web sites are being designed and developed by these techies and also by graphic designers. The designers want to create artistically and they are

used to designing for print, which is a completely different medium than the web. And such constraints as ease of use, download time, and functionality can seriously spoil their fun. I don't mean to say that all techies and designers are inept at producing effective web sites; however, both of these groups have a really different mindset and background than marketing people.

There needs to be a really close integration among the techies, the artists, and marketing people who understand usability and online marketing. That's something very important. In fact, an online marketing specialist should be directing the development of the web site.

An online marketing expert can help businesses and organizations leverage the potential of the Internet for marketing in a number of ways. This includes creating a user-friendly web site for target audiences; optimizing a web site for search engine market-

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ing; enhancing the design and layout of the site to achieve marketing, sales, communications and branding goals; and creating compelling content that attracts and retains the interest of target audiences. An online marketing expert can also help write and present content in the optimum way for the unique web environment and create content-specific web pages or stand-alone web sites to target specific groups of buyers. The online marketing expert should also have knowledge of the multiple online tools available for marketing and public relations, and should be aware of the newest marketing tools and trends in the ever-changing online environment.

I've had to direct projects with the graphics people, the arty people, and the techie people. Their talents are a valuable part of the development of a web site; however, one should never lose sight of the real goals of a web site. For most businesses and organizations, it is not about art or technology; it is about providing information and services.

Jakob Nielsen, the usability expert, talks about the clash between the engineers and the creatives. The engineering approach is to try to solve a problem for someone. The artistic approach is about self-expression. There has to be some sort of a balance. But I'm all about marketing, and I want to see results.

I had somebody come to me who had spent a very large sum of money on a business web site. He had used an advertising agency, and his web site—even on a high-speed connection—took a very long time to download. The entire web site was done in Flash and was set up so it could only be viewed after the whole web site had downloaded first, which took anywhere from 58 seconds to a few minutes, depending on the type of computer and connection. I told him, “People are going to be gone,” and, “You have about four seconds, maybe seven seconds, to engage your site visitor.” To prove to him that there was this problem, I did some informal usability testing and gave him feedback, which confirmed the problem. But this guy was young, aggressive in his business, a young entrepreneur, and I think he didn’t want to hear it—because it worked fine on *his* computer and because my feedback revealed that he had wasted a great deal of money on a web site that was basically unusable for many, if not most, people.

See what I’m saying? It’s like, you better get this, folks. People in business better get this. Because if you don’t get it, whoever does get it is going to have a competitive advantage over you. And if you don’t get it, you are going to waste a lot of money and a lot of time.

I’m surprised more companies don’t take the lead from the most popular web site out there, which is Google—which has probably the simplest home page on the web.

Look how popular it is.

And that’s one of the reasons why it’s popular—its simplicity.

That’s right.

You know, people have these Flash intros, these Flash splash pages. It’s like, why? What is the point? Whoever puts these up does not understand what people really want. And web design is about giving people what they really want, not what you think they want, or what you want.

If people want to be entertained, let them go to YouTube. But for a company doing business, trying to sell products and services, it’s not about the entertainment—it’s about the information. It’s about the content. This is not to say that entertainment cannot be used to help build a brand, or to create awareness or be used for marketing purposes; however, that entertainment should be user-friendly and should supplement and not supplant other useful content.

Obviously, the web site is just one part of the online marketing mix; publicity is another part. How does a company get publicity on the Internet?

There's a lot of ways to do it. There are direct-to-consumer news releases that can be loaded with keywords that are going to make you visible on the search engines. These online news releases can generate interest not only from buyers, but from bloggers and online news sites and offline media as well.

Then there's doing something remarkable, doing something fun or interesting and putting it on YouTube. Have you seen the video with the Diet Coke and Mentos experiments, where they put them together and create eruptions? It's so entertaining and it has been viewed over three million times on YouTube. In public relations they oftentimes will say there's no such thing as bad press—because even if it's bad, you're getting your name in front of people, you're creating awareness and visibility.

You can get publicity through the search engines, getting mentioned in blogs, doing creative things (like on YouTube), and word of mouth via email and social networking web sites. Everybody has their email lists of their friends, and if you do something really special and interesting with a web site, oftentimes people will send it around.

Recently a friend emailed me a link to something called the Color Quiz personality test, which reveals your current emotional state. I was familiar with the Color Quiz from years ago through a book called the Luscher Color Test, which contained this quiz. As soon as I got the email I thought, this would be great fun to take again. So I went to the web site at www.colorquiz.com and took the test. And of course, I told all my friends by sending it out to my email list.

Now if a company is creative and does something that's fun, it creates an opportunity for people to do the marketing for you, through their word of mouth online—emails and blogs and social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, Gather, Zaadz and LinkedIn. There's just a lot of opportunities for companies that are creative and willing to try out these different things.

“Get young people involved.”

A lot of what you're talking about are very nontraditional forms of marketing. How do you get a company to think outside the box?

You share with them examples of success stories of how other companies have done it, or how individuals have done it online. You tell them if they want results, if they want prospects, if they want customers, then they need to open themselves up to being creative and nontraditional.

I also would tell them to get young people involved. Young people are living online; this is their medium. They're very creative. A lot of them come up with really fun things. I think every company should have a young intern, or a few young interns, and listen to their ideas. Be open to it. In my job as director of tourism for the city of Minneapolis, I brought in a 15-year-old intern I called my "wandering child prodigy." He was just great.

Should these efforts supplement traditional marketing or replace some of what a company's doing?

I think it can supplement. Not completely replace, but in some cases you might even go to 80 percent online marketing and 20 percent offline, depending on your type of business.

I'll give you an example. A couple of years ago, a client of mine bought an old apartment building to convert to condos. The market got very competitive here in the Twin Cities, very rough. There was a glut of condo conversions and new condos on the market. He said, whoa, what am I going to do? I'm going to have to sell these. So I did a mix of online and offline marketing.

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I created a web site for his project. Then I put a large and colorful sign in front of the building that showed some interior photos and directed people to the web site. I made the web site address very large and prominent on the sign. The sign was on a fairly busy street, so a lot of people saw the sign.

I designed a content-rich web site with a lot of photographs, because people want to see what they are getting. I also featured a virtual tour on the web site and testimonials and information about the neighborhood. The web site was very easy to use and compatible with the lowest common denominator of user platform. The web site was up for nine months and the building completely sold out, which was a great success in such a tough market. We

had 9,000 visitors to the web site during that time, and 1,000 of those people who visited the web site came to the open houses, which were held every weekend. I kept sign-in sheets that asked people how they heard about the condos. And most of them heard about the condos online through my ads on Craigslist and through the web site.

Craigslist is great and it was very successful for getting prospects. But it was only one part of a three-step process. First, I put up the ad on Craigslist. Then I included a link to the web site from that ad. The web site created interest for viewing the condos at an open house, and the last step was prospects attending an open house.

There are all kinds of different ads that people put up on Craigslist, and you're competing with that. But if you really know how to use online marketing, you're going to have a competitive edge. You can use Craigslist to drive people to a dedicated web site to sell your product or service. If you know HTML markup language, you can also use that to dress up your ads on Craigslist and make them stand out from the crowd.

“You have to be really mindful of what kind of images you are putting online.”

Selling this condo project involved both online and offline marketing, and we would not have sold those condos without all that online marketing.

How is the Internet changing the whole business of real estate?

According to a 2006 survey by the the National Association of Realtors, over 80 percent of home buyers now use the Internet to search for a home. Realtors will tell you that people don't even ask to see a property until they've seen it online first. They want to see a lot of photographs, and also a virtual tour. If your photographs are really good, they will draw people to visit your property. But if your photographs are bad, or if you don't have photographs, people aren't going to come and visit your property. Most buyers are doing all their preliminary looking online.

Now here's the thing about the Internet: You have to be really mindful of what kind of images you are putting online. These images should be creating credibility and selling you and your products or services. Be careful with all the photographs you put up on your web site, including photos of yourself and your staff. Just know that these photos are going to project a

positive or negative image to people who don't know you. Images are very important online.

“It’s important to have a personality and a point of view.”

A number of years ago, I got a fabulous speaking engagement through a woman entrepreneur in Washington, D.C. who was putting on a conference there for women entrepreneurs and women leaders. She was going to hire a woman—I believe the woman's name was Diana Holman—to be a keynote speaker about the Internet. She typed holman.com into a browser window thinking she would find this woman and my web site came up instead. She said the minute she saw my photograph, she knew I was the one she wanted to hire, even though I was not her original choice. She had to substantiate it with my background and my abilities, and she had to have it approved by a committee that was working on this event. But I got that speaking engagement and today I still have clients who hired me because they saw me speak at that conference. So the photograph you have online is really important. It has the power to magnetize opportunities, so make sure it presents you in the best way possible.

The other thing is, I think it's important to have a personality and a point of view online. It depends on what type of business you have, but for a lot of companies, especially professional services companies, it's great to share some personal information, which can help to build a relationship.

There are a lot of web sites I go on where I want to see who the key players are in a company or organization. I want to see their faces; I want to get a feeling for them. When seeking professional services, a photo can make all the difference for whether I contact someone or not. And if there is no photo, I frequently will just keep searching to find people who do have a photo on their web site.

Do you have any general advice for a company wanting to improve their online presence?

First of all, get feedback. Get honest feedback about your web site, from the types of people who would be your customers. And be open to criticism and suggestions.

Finally, get creative. I'll tell you what really sells online, what engages people online, is humor and human interest. If you have people on staff, have them share their favorite jokes, favorite web sites, or their favorite humorous

YouTube videos. Have something enjoyable on your web site that makes it interesting, so somebody can say, you know what, you should go to this web site because they have this one section that's just hysterical, or remarkable, or amazing. Something so that people will do some word of mouth about your web site.

Sound Bites

I agree with Joan Holman about the state of web site design today. Too many sites are flashy (or Flash-y) for their own sakes, without regard for usability. I've also experienced the situation of a web site redesign being led by an artsy-fartsy design firm who only cares about an edgy style, or by a group of techies infatuated with the latest web programming technology; in fact, I've resigned from projects that didn't have the proper input from the company's marketing people. Focusing on the customer is what matters—not the style or the technology.

So here's what you can learn from Joan Holman's holistic approach to online marketing:

- Use the Internet to go directly to customers, bypassing the traditional gatekeeping media.
- Develop a web site that's information-rich and that responds to the customer's needs.
- Before you take your web site live, do usability testing to get feedback from your target audience.
- Avoid technology for technology's sake; take your customers' technology level into account before you add all sorts of tech-heavy features to your site.
- Be mindful of the photos you use on your site; friendly and attractive photos of company principals help build a relationship with customers.
- Get creative and use humor to engage site visitors and create a buzz about your site.

