

ADVERTISING ON THE INTERNET FREQUENTLY ASKED

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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HOW TO CONTACT THE AUTHOR

Michael Strangelove can be contacted by e-mail to

Mstrange@Fonorola.Net

or by postal mail to

SIE Inc

208 Somerset Street East, Suite A

Ottawa, Ontario

CANADA

K1N 6V2

Tel: 613-565-0982

FAX: 613-569-4433

INTRODUCTION

Advertisers spend billions of dollars every year to communicate their message to potential consumers. Now businesses are discovering that they can advertise to the Internet community at a fraction of the cost of traditional methods. With tens of millions of electronic mail users out there in cyberspace today, Internet advertising is an intriguing opportunity not to be overlooked. When 1998 rolls around and there are one hundred million consumers on the Internet, we may see many ad agencies and advertising-supported magazines go under as businesses learn to communicate directly to consumers in cyberspace.

How can a consultant, corporation, or an entrepreneur effectively use electronic mail to communicate to Internet user? The following document is intended to identify and answer frequently asked questions about Internet-facilitated marketing. This FAQ is based on the book, "How to Advertise on the Internet: An Introduction to Internet-Facilitated Marketing" (April 1994). If there are question you have about Internet advertising that are not addressed here, or if you have comments about how to improve this document, please feel free to contact me at Mstrange@Fonorola.Net.

Potential advertisers take note—do your homework before blasting onto the Internet. This virtual community has some very strong feelings about inappropriate activity, and the penalties for incorrect advertising methods could be international hate mail to you, your boss, and your stock holders.

Nota Bene: It is the intention of the author to promote the responsible business use of the Internet. Businesses will be making extensive use of the Internet for marketing and advertising, regardless of how Internet members feel about the non-commercial origins of the Internet. The Internet is not destined to be a TechnoUtopia, but simply a microcosm of global society, with all its warts and flowers. This FAQ is intended as a proactive measure to ensure that the commercial Internet user has adequate information about Internet culture so as to contribute to the ongoing development of Electric Gaia.

QUESTIONS ANSWERED IN THIS FAQ:

Is Advertising Allowed on the Internet?

Is Advertising on the Internet New?

Is the Internet a Mass Market?

Is Unsolicited Advertising Permitted?

Can I Send an E-Ad to Every Internet User?

INTERNET ADVERTISING TIPS:

- Find Out What is Acceptable
- Post Only to Appropriate Forums
- Keep it Short
- Avoid Sensationalism
- Create Your Own Forum
- Interact with the Internet Community

IS ADVERTISING ALLOWED ON THE INTERNET?

It is surprising how many people still see the Internet as a non-commercial, academic, and technical environment. Over fifty percent of the Internet is populated by commercial users (that equals five to ten million commercial users). The commercial Internet is the fastest growing part of cyberspace, which is doubling in size every year. There are more business users of the Internet than the total number of all the users of all commercial networks combined.

Over three years ago the US National Science Foundation lifted restrictions against commercial use of the Internet's American backbone. Now an Internet address on business cards is the latest craze. As the Internet is not owned by any one company or nation, the only real restrictions placed upon users are by the consensus of the virtual community itself. The trick to effective Internet advertising is taking the time to learn what is and is not acceptable within any one of the more than 7,000 online conferences.

The one major exception to this is any Internet users who have academic accounts provided by their university or research institute. It is almost certain that if you have an academic Internet account, you are forbidden to engage in commercial activity over your university's Internet connection. This may also hold true for many FreeNets—if you are uncertain about local authorized use policy, ask your Internet provider or system postmaster.

It should be noted that Usenet is no less commercial than the rest of the Internet. Gone forever are the days when the Internet was a private club for the techno-elite.

IS ADVERTISING ON THE INTERNET NEW?

Even among many long-time Internet users, there is a perception that Internet advertising is a new phenomenon. It is not. In the mid eighties, when the Internet was largely an academic, scientific, and technical community, commercial activity was still allowed if it was in support of research efforts. This meant that right from the first days of the Internet, there were software developers, publishers, consultants, and technicians hawking their wares to the academic community. Advertising has been taking place on the Internet since its beginning. The problem facing the Internet community is that the bigger the community gets (and it is going to be mindbogglingly big), the more it will attract the attention of advertising agencies.

IS THE INTERNET A MASS MARKET?

For quite some time to come, the Internet will never represent a mass market such as TV where content is controlled and packaged to a limited number of predefined and demographically homogenous audiences consisting of millions of views. There are no mass markets on the Internet - only micro communities with distinct histories, rules, and concerns. These communities are gathered into thousands of discussion forums ranging from hundreds to thousands of participants, but there are no groups of "millions." The challenge of the Internet-facilitated business is to find a way to reach these virtual communities on their terms, respecting their local customs. The

Internet is big, very big, but it is not a mass market that can be easily reached through mass mailing.

IS UNSOLICITED ADVERTISING PERMITTED?

Unsolicited advertising does indeed take place every day on the Net, and there even exists one company that sells access to over one million Internet addresses for direct e-mail advertising. Unsolicited advertising is a gray area of Internet culture, and therefore requires very careful planning and execution to avoid the wrath of an extremely vocal community.

Unsolicited advertising has been taking place on the Internet for quite some time, but must be done with extreme caution. There is no one to tell you not to send unsolicited commercial e-mail on the Internet, but if you send out 10,000 annoying advertisements, be prepared to receive 10,000 complaints. Also, companies that disregard Internet users' wishes are likely to find that the Internet community has a long memory (as any "oral" culture does) and is quite capable of engaging in anti-advertising campaigns and boycotts.

In this new interactive, digital, wired-to-the-bellybutton world, bulk unsolicited advertising is unnecessary, bad netiquette, and simply lazy— particularly when there are so many creative alternatives. The author has no wish to support the rise of "door-to-door" salespeople in cyberspace and therefore is intentionally censoring contact information from this FAQ on firms that sell Internet e-mail addresses and consult in bulk unsolicited e-mail advertising.

CAN I SEND AN E-AD TO EVERY INTERNET USER?

As Editor of THE INTERNET BUSINESS JOURNAL, Aneurin Bosley is frequently asked if it is possible to send an electronic mail advertisement (E-Ad) to every user on the Internet. I always find it somewhat disturbing that there are companies out there who would want to do this. Fortunately for the Internet, it is not possible to send an E-Ad to every person on the Internet. Unfortunately for the Internet, it is probably only a matter of time before some sick mind figures out a method of simultaneously annoying every Internet user. For now at least, there is no way to post an e-mail message to every Internet user, nor, in this writer's opinion, should such a tool be developed.

INTERNET ADVERTISING TIPS

FIND OUT WHAT IS ACCEPTABLE

Within some Internet forums, any commercial activity, no matter how subtle, is unacceptable and will be met with a strong negative response (usually called "flaming"). Take the time to "listen in" to the forum to which you intend to post. Notice what other people post and what the group's reaction is to commercial messages. If a press release or product announcement is met with intense flaming, then do not risk alienating this group of Internet users with your commercial message.

POST ONLY TO APPROPRIATE FORUMS

Begin your market research by identifying the appropriate online conferences (also called forums, lists, or newsgroups). If you are a selling purebred dogs, do not post your message to the cat lover's list. Some forums have FAQ files (Frequently Asked Questions). Read these files to determine the nature of the forum and acceptable use policies.

KEEP IT SHORT

Avoid posting long e-mail messages. Your product or service announcements should never exceed two screens in length (about 50 lines long). Many individuals on the Internet receive a considerable amount of e-mail, so your message must be short and to the point if it is going to be read at all. You can note in your posting that further details are available upon request.

AVOID SENSATIONALISM

The Internet community is content oriented, whereas most advertisers deal in style, metaphor, image, and hype. Traditional advertising copy will not go over well at all on the Net. The Internet community appreciates quality, filtered information, so find a way to add value to your message. Coach your message within a commentary on industry trends, create an electronic newsletter that provides a range of related information, enter into dialogue with the forum about surrounding issues. Remember that nothing is more obvious in low ASCII than empty hype.

CREATE YOUR OWN FORUM

It is possible to create a Usenet newsgroup for discussion of your products (Usenet is received by most Internet users and contains over six thousand newsgroups). Many companies have already done so, such as ZEOS, which has a newsgroup called biz.zeos.general. This is a form of passive Internet-facilitated marketing. Passive advertising allows a business to create a forum on the Internet and invite the rest of the Internet to join in. By creating your own forum, moderating the submissions (filtering out irrelevant postings), and providing high quality information, not only about your products but about your particular commercial sector, you will establish a growing readership in much the same way that newsstand magazines function.

INTERACT WITH THE INTERNET COMMUNITY

For the immediate future, the costs of Internet-facilitated advertising will not be associated with expensive visual productions (at least until the domination of Mosaic and similar tools), but with the labor required to dialogue with the desired market areas found within over seven thousand discussion forums. This labor factor for truly responsible, responsive, and effective Internet advertising will become a critical consideration as the staggering Internet growth rate pushes these numbers to tens of thousands of forums and hundreds of millions of users over the next decade.

The business world is going to have to learn a new language when it communicates to the Internet community—the language of content-based, interactive, community-oriented dialogue. Unidirectional pontificating coming from the lofty heights of corporate sales

and marketing offices will only alienate the typical Internet user. To be fully accepted by the majority of Internet users, a business will need to participate in the virtual communities they wish to reach. This means that business must be willing and prepared to enter into dialogue in an appropriate manner on the appropriate forums. Unlike any other medium familiar to advertisers, the Internet is fully bi-directional—be prepared to answer for your product or service if it is less than 100% satisfactory. The Internet user will not hesitate to tell you otherwise, as well as tell the rest of the Internet community!

A WORD OF WARNING

Most advertisers will fail at their initial attempt at Internet-facilitated advertising. This is not at all surprising in light of the fact that most advertising in any medium is woefully ineffective, mind-bogglingly boring, and uncreative at best—deceptive and annoying at worst.

Why will advertisers fail when they succumb to the seduction of the virgin fields of the Internet? Traditional advertising will fail to achieve results on the Internet because this virtual community is oriented towards content. In contrast, advertisers usually focus on image and style—broad archetypes delivered to mass audiences. But the language of the Internet, for the majority of its population, and for some time to come, is low ASCII (Aa-Zz, 1-9 text plus a few miscellaneous characters). More than being a mainly text-based environment, the Internet is first and foremost an oral culture, where the keyboard mediates the spoken word to a complex matrix of subcultures among users numbering in the tens of millions. Sensitivity to Internet culture will define success for any business entering into this global matrix. Remember that today's Internet arose out of a non-commercial environment. Be forewarned—The Internet is not television, not the post office, and certainly not yours to do with it as you please.

IN THE NEXT EDITION:

The next edition of this FAQ will feature questions and answers about the utility of Mosaic as the first “killer app” for the Internet-facilitated advertiser.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Strangelove (Mstrange@Fonorola.Net) is founder and CEO of Strangelove Internet Enterprises, Inc., publishers of THE INTERNET BUSINESS JOURNAL, Internet Advertising Review, and ELECTROPOLIS: Government Online. Michael writes a regular column about the Internet in ONLINE ACCESS and has coauthored, with Diane Kovacs, The Directory of Electronic Journals, Newsletters, and Academic Discussion Lists (Association of Research Libraries, 1993, Third Edition). Michael is also author of the new book, How to Advertise on the Internet: An Introduction to Internet-Facilitated Marketing. Sample copies of THE INTERNET BUSINESS JOURNAL are available upon request. In his spare time, Michael is completing a Ph.D at the University of Ottawa. Stay tuned for the return of Dr. Strangelove, coming to an Internet near you.

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SIE Inc

208 Somerset Street East, Suite A

Ottawa, Ontario CANADA

K1N 6V2

Tel: 613-565-0982

FAX: 613-569-4433

Mstrange@Fonorola.Net