

The New Market Rules:

ONLINE MARKETING SUCCESS AND THE RACE FOR CUSTOMERS IN CYBERSPACE

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The Death of the Phone Book and The Rise of Online Marketing

*Internet marketing spending is now increasing **eight times** faster than TV and radio.*

From a recent report by WebProNews.com²

The phone book is dead. New technology gives consumers the power to skip TV ads. Google and other search engines now offer the quickest, easiest, and most effective means for reaching vast numbers of consumers. And business is finally getting the message: Online marketing isn't just a useful supplement to traditional marketing activities. If used smartly and effectively, it can replace them altogether.¹

This is not just speculation; it's measurable data. A major advertising spending study conducted by California's Outsell, Inc. has found that, where online marketing activities were once viewed as a supplement to traditional, long-established marketing efforts, they're now actually beginning to replace some of them (trade show participation, for one).¹ The study also states that "leading B2B [business-to-business] trade information providers will generate 35 to 50 percent of their revenue online within two to three years."³

Spending on Internet advertising is growing at a rate of eight times that of TV and radio spending, which is growing at only 2.4 percent. Internet spending is also growing six times faster than print budgets, which are growing by about 3.3 percent.² Furthermore, more than 80 percent of advertisers use some form of Internet marketing that emphasizes search marketing. This number is significantly greater than earlier projections, and is expected to grow to around 90 percent in the next two years.²

A recent report by HRMarketer.com suggests that online marketing can replace traditional marketing altogether.¹

So, small businesses that might have limited their advertising in the past to a simple ad in the yellow pages now often prefer to place their dollars in search engine placement. Why? Consumers seeking out information from the yellow pages usually receive no more than a simple phone number and address. But when they use a search engine like Google, for example, they're rewarded with an assortment of useful information. Address, phone number, website links, hours of operation, distance from their location, a quick comparison to other companies, and other helpful data are delivered instantly. Plus, the online information is updated much more frequently.

And the advantages of a strong online presence are only getting better. Google's new Short Message Service (SMS), for example, provides all the useful information that its website does, but personalized to the user's demographics, and delivered directly to his or her mobile phone. In not much more than a decade, Google has become a worldwide presence with huge revenues and an ability to put very substantial marketing dollars behind their services.

Leading trade info providers will soon generate 35 to 50 percent of their revenue online.

From a recent study by Outsell, Inc.³

The rapid growth of these new formats demonstrates just how fast the public is shifting its preferences. It's not only that people are *willing* to seek out information in new formats. Rather, they're changing over to these new formats *completely*, and those who are unwilling or unable to move into online marketing will simply be left behind.

When You Need an Expert: Using the "The Five Pillars of Promoting Your Business Online" to Choose the Best Web Hosting Partner

Of course, the obvious starting point and central hub to any online marketing campaign is developing and maintaining a website. A smart, simple, and well-designed website can offer valuable features that no traditional marketing venues can match.

But the average small- to medium-sized business owner already has a full plate just running and growing existing business. There isn't time to drop everything and

become an expert in a new and somewhat intimidating field like online marketing, no matter how lucrative the results promise to be. And it's also rarely feasible for a smaller-scale organization to commit large amounts of revenue or resources to creating a new marketing plan in unfamiliar territory.

To this end, web hosting companies offer a seemingly ideal solution: Get a Web professional to host, maintain, and even design and create your website. Ideally, this frees up valuable time and resources for small business owners to focus on what's important to them (namely, their core business activities).

Some hosting companies **own** their data center and servers, but most **rent** them.

What is a web hosting company? Simply put, it's a service provider that places, or "hosts," your website on a server, a computer that's specially configured to "serve up" websites. Essentially, these companies are renting out space to your site on their servers. They generally offer a fast Internet connection while hosting many other websites—usually in the thousands—on an array of servers.

But with more and more web hosting companies in the market—there are now literally thousands⁴—it's apparent that they're not all created equal. So many different options can make an intimidating task out of determining which web host is right for you. However, there are definite advantages to having so many companies competing for your business. You have the power to choose—the option to select a company that not only hosts your website, but also designs it, maximizes its effectiveness, and actively helps it to grow (as opposed to basic web hosts that simply rent you space on their servers).

So how do you decide? Which web hosting companies will optimize your web presence with proven business tactics and marketing know-how, and which simply seek to gain a quick buck and boost their online portfolio? Of course, most companies are somewhere in between these extremes. Almost all have some basic common features, but beyond that, they vary greatly in add-ons, plan packages, and price. And, the same with any important decision, the first step is to determine what your needs are. The following factors usually have the greatest effect on the price you'll pay:

Free Web Hosting offers sound great, but the cost is less performance, reliability, and customer support.

From findmyhosting.com⁴

- How much disk space do you need? Actually, you probably won't need much. Basic website features usually take up minimal space, so even a small amount can accommodate relatively large sites. Beware of companies who offer an abundance of disk space at a low price. They may be inflating their perceived value by offering something they know you don't need—think of those giant, 60-ounce drinks gas stations and convenience stores like to sell. Unless your website offers a lot of video streaming or other specialized media features, you simply don't need much disk space. (And remember, you can always upgrade later. As your website grows, it's a simple matter to purchase more disk space, as necessary.)
- What bandwidth requirements does your site need? This depends on how many visitors you can accommodate, how much video or audio you plan to make available—factors that fluctuate depending on the size of your company—but for most, it is a very small number. (FindMyHosting.com advises: Beware of those companies offering "unlimited" bandwidth—also an unnecessary feature.⁴)
- What kind of server should you have? The more basic your website needs are, the less this matters. However, if your website has complex functions, the server type takes on greater importance. (It's important to note that, while some large hosting companies own their own data center and servers, most rent their server space from larger companies.)⁴
- How many email accounts will you need? How many employees and clients must be accommodated?
- Do you need customer and tech support 24 hours a day, or will standard business hours suffice? Do you need support by both phone and email, or just one of these? Your time is valuable, so you'll want to choose a company with strong support (i.e., a low hold-time for support calls).⁴
- Can you get by with a minimum of features, or do you intend to gradually grow your website out? Be cautious of "Free Web Hosting" offers. These plans, while often legitimate, reduce the usability and professionalism of your site by placing unsightly (and to consumers, annoying) banner ads at the top of your pages. You'll also sacrifice performance, reliability, customer support, and basically any opportunity for growth.⁴

A good web host will **save you the time** of becoming an expert in online marketing.

Today's most valuable marketing tool is a **smart, effective, and eye-catching website.**

These questions can often be answered quickly and with certainty by a professional web hosting company. If your web hosting company choice is trustworthy, it will answer these questions for you and gauge your needs based on the current size of your business and your realistic plans for future growth.

So how do you determine if a company can be trusted? San Diego-based Aplus.Net, a web hosting company ranked among CNET's "Most Popular" Web Hosting sites for more than 30 consecutive weeks (and counting), as well as past recipient of the prestigious CNET Editors' Choice Award, has established "The Five Pillars of Online Success." These "Five Pillars" are proven tools in establishing and maximizing a website's effectiveness. A good web hosting company will not only understand these tools, but will apply them to your business when and where they're most needed—saving you the time and hassle of becoming an expert in design, search engines, and dozens of other aspects of e-marketing.

PILLAR 1. Design and Develop an Effective, Professional Website

Few would argue with the claim that today's most valuable tool in growing revenue is building an effective web presence with a smart, effective, and eye-catching web site. A hosting company that understands this principle will offer a wide assortment of essential services and put your company's website in the hands of experienced, qualified professionals seasoned in creating effective, attractive web pages. Among these services:

■ Professional Design Plans

If you're starting from the very beginning, you'll want a company that can not only host but professionally design an effective website for your business. Even if you or an employee have some experience here, it's best to rely on a professional for this important step. Of course, websites for up-and-coming smaller businesses trying to establish a professional online presence will be different from larger companies promoting many products with active web components. The same principles of effective design, however, will remain constant. A look at a company's portfolio will show you the quality of its design, while giving you insight into the types of clients they currently work with.

■ Do-It-Yourself Design Tools

A good web host will also provide helpful tools and guidance to those business owners and managers committed to making their own rules and goals. With "Do-It-Yourself" design tools, you can often build your own website simply and quickly with user-friendly tools for those with or without prior HTML knowledge. However, using such tools can give websites a "cookie cutter" feel, and can sacrifice originality. Companies that are more established as a brand or with more ambitious plans for their website may need to build a more unique website and thus may be wise to leave design to the experts.

■ Content and Image Management Tools

Give your visitors the ability to create and edit website content collaboratively (like Wikipedia) with Tiki Wiki and MediaWiki tools. Image manipulation, image galleries, PDF-to-Web converters, and other tools ease the process of adding, adjusting, and resizing images on your site. Plus, add-ons like web counters, weather toolbars, and RSS feed readers (which syndicate news, bulletins, blogs, etc.) give your visitors a variety of features to help keep them from straying to other sites.

■ Website Interaction Tools

Making visitor interaction and feedback easy inspires confidence and satisfaction with your website. Interactive tools like forums and blogs facilitate discussions among your visitors and let them share their thoughts directly, providing you with almost instant insight into just how users feel about your site (and, possibly, your competitor's). These tools are designed to help you measure your site's success by quickly showing you what's working and helping you fix what's not. The *Web Host Industry Review* enthusiastically hails the use of blogging to this end: "[Blogging] provides companies with a means of gathering instant feedback and fresh insight from customers ... It can enable businesses to focus their communications with customers, generate buzz in the market by highlighting new products and describing community involvement or upcoming events."⁵

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*Your goal should be to **dominate the search engine results** in your market. Are enough visitors finding your site? Does traffic increase from month to month?*

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A search engine booster service is crucial to your success. It places you directly in the path of shoppers looking for products and services similar to yours.

■ Website Navigation Tools

Nobody likes a website that's difficult to navigate. And, more importantly, nobody *revisits* a website that's difficult to navigate. Site search tools like sitemap builders simplify the consumer's experience by making navigation easy and uncomplicated. Remember, satisfied visitors are much more likely to return.

PILLAR 2. Drive Traffic to Your Site

A good preliminary indicator of your website's effectiveness begins with a simple visitor count. In fact, the success of your website rotates around this one important factor: Are enough visitors finding your site? Does your site traffic increase from month to month? Your goal should be to dominate the search engine results in your market. It used to be a simple matter of placing the highest bid. Now, it's a complicated equation that includes click-to ratio and other sometimes confusing factors. There are two kinds of search engine results to keep in mind: There are the real, "natural" results that are determined by factors like the relevancy of your site's content to the words being searched for. There are also the "paid" results—those that are placed strategically at the very top and on the side of the results page, for a specific fee. Both are highly effective in bringing your site to the attention of consumers who might not otherwise find it.

■ eTraffic

There is a well-defined art to driving traffic: *Get to the top of search engine results!* Consumers usually visit your site because they search for products or services similar to yours on major search engines. Therefore, visitors are qualified and targeted sales prospects who already know what they want to buy. So why not invest in a presence in search engines, where they're sure to look for you? eTraffic tools maximize the "paid" presence of your site on search engines for maximum exposure to potential customers.

■ Search Engine Booster

A search engine booster service is crucial to your success, optimizing how your site ranks in typical search engine scenarios. How relevant is your site to commonly searched-for words? How many and what sites link to you? How well are the pages within your site linked together? How well are your MetaTags written? (These are the HTML codes that tell the search engine what your site is about.) A search engine booster streamlines your marketing efforts by placing your company directly in the path of online shoppers who are already seeking out products and services similar to yours. It's a complicated process that's constantly changing, so it's difficult to become an expert unless you're involved in the industry full-time. Hence, there is real value in partnering with a company that acts as the expert for you.

■ Do-It-Yourself Search Engine Software Package

Even if you're confident that you have all the search engine expertise you need, you still need the resources to get the job done. "Do-it-yourself" search engine tools are designed to maximize your presence among search engine results step-by-step. Submission and saturation tools submit your site to the major search engines and show the number of your pages being picked up. Link popularity tools find the total number of links to your site on the web, while backlink trackers show you what and where these links are. Customized Google tools are popular ways to maximize your presence on the industry's best and most-used search engine.

■ Traffic-Increasing and Retaining Tools

Don't lose business because of occasional (and sometimes inevitable) software glitches, whether caused by your software or a partner's. Traffic-retaining tools are designed to keep your visitors in case of an error, and re-direct visitors when an incorrect page or link sends them elsewhere. And, in addition to the eTraffic tools listed above, eCommerce Boosters improve natural search rankings for Miva 5 websites.

PILLAR 3. Engage Your Customers with Effective Sales Tools

After you've ensured that your website is easy to find, the next step is to make sure that nothing on your site prevents an easy and satisfying experience for your visitors. After all, one simple mistake in the layout or logic of a website and customers will be quick to move on to your competitors. (And remember, those competitors are just a quick mouse-click away—not several miles down the road, like in the days of brick-and-mortar shops.) This isn't oversimplifying; good intentions really are not enough here. Your site needs practical and proven sales tools that allow your users to find all the info they need quickly and easily, so they can make an informed purchase that they'll have confidence in. From real-time sales tools to mass mailing tools, there are a host of features out there designed to do just this, and many of them are usually included as part of standard hosting plans.

■ Customer Getters

Turn your visitors into customers. Chat products gives site visitors instant contact with you—perfect when your visitor is unable or unwilling to get involved in a phone call. This is often a big advantage over competitors, most of whom are probably lacking this feature. And wherever you happen to be, "Push to Talk" features let your website visitors get you on the phone with the click of a button, without publicly revealing your phone number—so you can avoid the spam and unnecessary calls that go along with revealing your contact info on your site. Ideal for the small businessman without call center personnel and for those who travel or are in the field a lot.

■ Customer Keepers

Your competitors would love to steal away your customer base. Don't let them! There are many tools to learn about your customers and get the feedback you need to keep them happy—including mailing lists, customer surveys, online forms, eLetter builders, form mail tools, and much more.

■ eCommerce Boosters

Selling products on your site? Let visitors buy directly from you with the Miva Merchant shopping cart feature. List your products on eBay, Amazon, Froogle, and Shopping.com with e-Store Connectors. OS Commerce tools also let you easily maintain your own online store-management software program

How many visitors does a partner site refer to you? Where are they located? How long do they visit?

Web Analytics gives you specific info on how people find and interact with your site.

PILLAR 4. Analyze and Improve: Keeping Your Site at the Top

Imagine having the ability to track your customers' every step in an old-fashioned, brick-and-mortar store. Now imagine being able to track what store they went to before yours, and which one they'll go to next. Traditional marketing formats like print media and TV can never offer you that kind of power. With a website, however, it's relatively simple to track this information, and more. If your business isn't the type that would hire an expensive, \$100k marketing director to understand your customer's buying patterns, you need site maintenance and visitor profile and analysis tools.

■ Web Analytics

How do most visitors find your site? What other sites are they most likely to visit? What competitor do you have to worry about most? Web Analytics analyzes your site's web traffic and generates reports based on that data. How many visitors does a certain partner website refer to you? Where are those visitors located, geographically? How long do they visit? What connections do they have, what browsers are they using? Web Analytics gives you the specifics on how users are finding and interacting with your site, letting you maximize your site's delivery to connect with even more visitors.

■ Performance-Testing Tools

Business changes quickly, and can grow unexpectedly: Your site needs to keep up! Test your site's performance under pressure before an unforeseen crisis does it for you. Site stress test tools simulate a heavy traffic load; network troubleshooters check the connection between your site and your local computer; load time optimization tools speed up load time; and usage meters display your disk space usage and additional information.

Nothing on your site should prevent an **easy** and **satisfying** experience for visitors.

Let your web host take on the burden of keeping up with shifting consumer trends.

■ **Customer Feedback and Behavior Analysis Tools**

Let your web hosting company take on the burden of keeping up with shifting consumer trends by enabling you to analyze your customers' reactions based on their feedback and online behavior. Website statistics tools report your site's traffic such as number of visitors and hits, while customer surveys allow easy user feedback about your products and services. Customer feedback dialog, guest books, forums, and blogs all provide quick insight into visitors' thoughts and ideas, while giving them the satisfaction of speaking out about their experience on your site.

■ **Site Maintenance Plans and Tools**

Online marketing, and the technology it's based on, can change in fast and sometimes confusing ways. Testing and analysis are the keys to keeping your website on top of the competition. Re-Direct URL, custom error pages managers, directory protection, and HTML validation tools are all useful features that make sure your site is running at optimal, error-free levels.

PILLAR 5. Protecting Your Site and Ensuring Safety for Your Customers

With identity theft and online scams at a sharp increase, consumers are becoming more and more wary of the Internet as a safe place to do business. Visitors must feel safe and secure about the purchases they make on your site, and reassured that their data is safe. A quality hosting company will provide awareness of and access to the many certifying organizations that exist to promote online security, as well as tools to protect your business identity, make your credit card transactions safe, shield you from spam, and much more.

Visitors must feel safe and secure about doing business on your website.

■ **Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) Server Certificates**

With a warranty of up to \$1 million, SSL certification is an essential. If your site has an online store and/or accepts credit card information, or transmits any confidential information in any capacity, you need SSL certification. Many consumers know what the SSL "seal" looks like and where it should be located on a web page. If they don't see it, they likely won't buy from your site. And that, of course, is unacceptable. Tools such as secure server managers allow you to request and test a secure certificate for your site. Shared and private SSL tools are also available to ensure your site's credit card transactions are secure.

■ **Spam Protection**

Spam filter options give you the information and guidance to set your own spam-filtering rules. Form mail tools can create an email form on your site to get the information emailed to you.

■ **Identity and Virus Protection and Other Safeguarding Tools**

While protecting your customers is essential, protecting the security and proprietorship of your own site is also necessary. Domain guards notify you when a domain similar to yours is registered so you can watch for any possible upcoming competition. In addition, domain monitoring tools inform you when the status of any specific domain name has changed. Plus, set up unique usernames/passwords so only certain visitors can access specific parts of your site, and use safeguarding options to make sure that all personal information registered online is concealed and well-protected.

As you can see above, there's a lot to learn about effective online marketing. No longer can your website be peripheral to your company's marketing plans—it must be your central tool. Whether you're an expert or not, it helps to choose a partner who understands the finer points of successful online marketing and who can offer the essential tools listed above.

With your online marketing in **Aplus.Net's** hands, you can focus on doing what you do best: **growing your business.**

Enter Aplus.Net

Why should a business owner choose Aplus.Net as his or her website manager? An expert in online marketing as well as one of the nation's top ten privately held web hosting companies, Aplus.Net provides the essential web marketing know-how to launch small- and medium-sized businesses' websites to the top of their respective markets. The above "Five Pillars of Online Success," and Aplus.Net's ability to successfully meet each of those needs, serve as evidence of our commitment to maximizing your online success. With your online marketing in Aplus.Net's hands, you can focus on doing what you do best: growing your business.

A central figure in Web services since the Internet's commercial start in 1995, Aplus.Net is one of the top ten privately held web hosting companies in the United States, committed to providing our customers the best prices in the industry. That's why more than 200,000 small- to medium-sized businesses trust Aplus.Net for their Internet presence. While the competition struggles to imitate what we've already done, Aplus.Net is moving forward to the next innovation.

To learn more about how Aplus.Net can save you time and money by maximizing your online marketing efforts, visit www.aplus.net or call us at **1.877.275.8763**.

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