

free-range thinking™

free-range thinking™ is a monthly newsletter for public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses that want to reach more people more effectively.

Beyond the E-Brochure

Search the web and you'll find hundreds of public interest websites that are the functional equivalent of an electronic brochure. That's one model to consider- but did you know there are at least six others?

When Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1887, he knew instantly how this miraculous device would serve millions: as a dictaphone. As if this brilliant prediction were not enough, the Wizard of Menlo Park enumerated a list of other likely uses: preserving spoken wills, teaching spelling, reading to the blind - he even envisioned a talking clock. Recording music, on the other hand, struck Edison as an undignified use of such a technological marvel. Naturally, music would become the phonograph's killer app.

A century later, life-changing technology faces us yet again, except this time we all get to play Edison. As we construct our websites, collectively inventing the Internet in the process, we're all still seeking optimal ways to use this new medium. Some early approaches are succeeding, as Jerry Yang, Steve Case, or Jeff Bezos can attest. But for every Yahoo, AOL, or Amazon.com there are hundreds of failures. Every day, companies are burning through millions of dollars doing the 1999 version of reading to the blind,

teaching spelling, or preserving oral wills. So let's be honest: most of us are still feeling our way, searching for our own version of music.

With fewer dollars to spare, public interest groups have been conservative in their experimentation -- and it shows. Surf the web and you'll find dozens of PI sites designed essentially around a single model: the e-brochure, the electronic equivalent of your basic information folder. E-brochures serve a legitimate purpose: they can replace mailing to every potential member or supporter, and they can keep current members updated on your activities. But that's a limited role. As Lisa Silverberg (formerly of HandsNet) astutely observed, e-brochures describe your mission, they don't do your mission. And they rarely provide compelling reasons for the average visitor to return.

What follows, in marked contrast, are six models that can help generate higher volumes of traffic and pursue your mission. All six models are being successfully used right now (see box for URLs) and one -- or a combination --

may be right for you.

1. The Portal

This is simply a first stop, the doorway through which visitors pass on their way to the Internet's vast resources. By operating a portal (e.g., Yahoo), you leverage the pulling power of other destinations to bring people to your site. A PI group devoted to children's issues, for example, could generate more traffic by designing a portal with links to everything the web offers for parents, from low-cost baby furniture to high-quality pediatric health care. Links to information about the group's programs would also be included on the home page. Inevitably, the parents who bookmark this portal and pass through it periodically will find time to learn about the sponsoring organization.

2. Syndication

Rather than trying to attract surfers to your site, start developing information or services that other sites will want to feature. "E-The People" uses the web to connect activists with (by their count) 170,000 decision-makers in local, state and federal government. This service is so valuable that many newspapers feature E-The People on their websites as the "activism button."

3. Activist Hub

If someone wants to protect dolphins, odds are they'll search the web for dolphin sites before navigating through all the environmental groups with marine programs. To take advantage of this tendency, many groups create temporary sites with topical URLs such as saveorganic.org or the anti-impeachment inspired moveon.org. The site itself is about activism: devoted

to a single issue, it exists to convert interested visitors into e-mailers and petitioners whose collective voice will have some weight. The sponsoring group (and its overall agenda) is secondary but still has visibility on the home page. Since these sites can generate high traffic in a short period, they also can create broader awareness of the group's work.

4. The Community Site

You provide the framework, your visitors provide the content. There are two versions of this model: a closed community, which is only open to registered members; and an open community which invites submissions from all comers. E-Law is a closed community in which environmental lawyers share information about their work; Forgiving.org is an open community that invites visitors to share stories of forgiveness they have received, given, or witnessed. The appeal of community sites is very simple: they meet their users needs because they are designed by the users. And like portals, users learn about the sponsoring organization through repeated visits.

5. Solar System

Rather than asking visitors to find a single home site and then drill down to locate desired information (the so-called "mountain" approach), try dividing your offerings into more specific sites, each a marketable entity in its own right. Environmental Defense Fund operates a conventional home site - the "sun" in its solar system - while also maintaining [The Chemical Scorecard](http://TheChemicalScorecard.org) (to track pollution by zip code), [Action Network](http://ActionNetwork.org) (to connect activists with decision-makers),

and Hogwatch (which tracks pollution from hog waste in North Carolina and Colorado). Each orbiting “planet” links back to the home site, but most visitors find these sites directly, following their interest directly to the site.

6. Socially-Conscious

Commerce The web is a powerful tool for aggregating demand, and the Natural Resources Defense Council is tapping this power. NRDC’s site is currently collecting 100,000 signatures from people interested in purchasing environmentally-cleaner automobiles. The signatures will be presented to major automakers on Earth Day 2000 as evidence of genuine demand for what NRDC calls “earthsmartcars.”

If these descriptions are too cryptic, take the “site-seeing tour” for a better sense of each model. And then ask yourself: is my sitedescribing our mission more than its doing our mission? If so, it’s time to move beyond the E-brochure.

free-range site-seeing tour

Portal

EnviroLink
www.envirolink.org

Syndication

E the People
www.e-thepeople.com

Activist Hub

Protect our Heritage
Forests
www.ourforests.org

Community Sites

E-Law
www.elaw.org (closed
community)
Campaign for Forgiveness
Research
www.forgiving.org (open
community)

Solar System

Environmental Defense
Fund
www.edf.org
Chemical Scorecard
www.scorecard.org
Action Network
www.actionnetwork.org
Hogwatch
www.hogwatch.org

Socially-Conscious

Commerce Natural Re-
sources Defense Council,
www.nrdc.org
(click on For clean cars
link on home page)

free-range follow-up

Last month’s story on the “Forty Day Fight” concluded with this reminder: “Everything you do carries your message.” In that light, consider this excerpt from a recent New Yorker profile of J. Mays, the legendary automobile designer responsible for the new VW Beetle:

“To demonstrate how an emotional relationship with a product might be encouraged, Mays asked the audience to think about what their most intimate link to the design of their cars is. ‘Reach into your pocket and look at your keys,’ he said. ‘You will probably find a nasty piece of black plastic with a piece of metal sticking out of it. But this is an opportunity to make an umbilical connection to the consumer.’ Then he showed slides of

keys that elicit the associations people are supposed to have with various cars - a key for a sport-utility vehicle that looks something like a Swiss Army knife, a key for a truck that resembles a padlock, and a sensuous, leather-bound key for a Jaguar. For a trifling amount of money, Mays said, carmakers could create tiny pieces of foldout sculpture that would serve as reminders of brand identity...

[Excerpted from "Detroit Tiger," *The New Yorker*, July 12, 1999]

Now ask yourself: what does your "umbilical connection" to your members (or customers) look like? Is it a plastic card, a bumper sticker, a coffee mug? More to the point, is it the equivalent of a nasty piece of black plastic, or is it something more? I know what Mays would say: it's a reminder of your identity.

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