

WEB MASTER

How to use your online presence to build out your niche



BY LAURA GREEN

It used to take a lot of work for Don Ascione and his sales team to secure new business for his \$15 million distribution companies, Continental Steel & Tube Co. and its subsidiary Continental Chemical USA.

"We were calling people up and soliciting their business, trying to find out ... who would be buying titanium? — OK, aerospace," says Ascione, president and founder of the Fort Lauderdale-based companies. "Then we'd have to go find all the aerospace companies and say, 'OK, Boeing,' and try to find a buyer in Boeing, and get them to talk to you. It's daunting."

Ascione knew he could no longer rely on print advertising to generate leads as more and more buyers of industrial products moved online.

"People get impatient and you are talking to them on the phone and they want to see a picture of something — they'll send you an e-mail and if it's not there in 30 seconds, they'll say, 'Where is it?' ... The world has changed to instant gratification," he says. "There is no waiting anymore."

"We looked at it and said, 'OK, we're not going to do print anymore,' and decided to put all of our eggs in the Internet basket."

Ascione's online strategy was to make Continental's online presence more credible but also more accessible to potential buyers. Without print, the Internet would be his only sales channel.

With the help of longtime sales partner ThomasNet, Ascione approved a complete website redesign for both Continental businesses, updating the sites' capabilities to include online product catalogs, SEO-driven language,



Continental Steel & Tube Co.'s Don Ascione

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e-commerce shopping carts and user-friendly search functions. Each company also developed a Web presence on ThomasNet's online distribution portal.

By utilizing the Web effectively to showcase its strengths, a smaller company, such as Continental, can build a niche for its specialty products.

"It provides an avenue for people to find us and to know what we do and what we are capable of providing," Ascione says. "We have always been exporting for a long time, but our Internet strategy has allowed people in other countries to find us."

"It sets us in our niche products so that we can

compete with the big guys. We've developed a relationship with our sources [so] that when somebody wants those particular items, we can be competitive that we can get the delivery. We can satisfy the end users' requirements. We know that our price and delivery is going to be just as good as a Ryerson or an EMJ or Alliance or any one of these billion-dollar companies."

It also brings the customers to you.

"With the strategy that we have now, what happens is people call us," Ascione says. "When they call us we're in a better position. They found us and they're looking for us to provide something for them. So they are receptive when we call back, when we respond back to them. When they do, we actually put a markup on it and try to make a profit."

As more customers make purchases through your site, you can use Web tracking to monitor which products are most popular with which customers, making changes to your online strategy as customer demands change.

"We're updating on a regular basis our catalog and our content on our website. ... As we develop more sources and better sources and we have more information, we evaluate what kind of information we are able to provide to the customer and what they want," Ascione says.

"We want customers to come to our site and find useful information and help them achieve their job and to make them and their company profitable. That will help us become profitable because they'll find value in what we do." <<

Take sales online

You already know how to make your website more effective, if you ask Linda Rigano. You're already doing it offline.

"A good Web strategy starts with ... creating a Web experience that replicates the company's sales process," says the executive director of strategic services at Thomas Industrial Network, which connects buyers and sellers through offerings like the sourcing site ThomasNet.com and a Web solutions group that improves website performance.

ThomasNet's VSET strategy breaks that down:

Verify. "The first step in the process is that a buyer wants to verify that you make what they (want)," Rigano says. "(If I'm looking for a container and I see a big picture of the facility, I see a mission statement, but I don't see a lot about containers, am I going to spend time there? No."

Search and evaluate. "That might be questions they're asking that customer service person on the phone; it'll be questions that customer service person is asking back: 'How many, what's the material, what's the size, what's the quantity?'"

Take action. "This is what you want to do when you get off of the phone with somebody. Is customer service preparing a quotation? Are they sending more information? Are they taking an order? ... It's all about making it easier for that buyer to do business with you." <<

HOW TO REACH: Thomas Industrial Network, (866) 585-1191 or www.thomasnet.com

HOW TO REACH: Continental Steel & Tube Co., (954) 332-2290 or www.continentalsteel.com