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Miyoung Jeong
Iowa State University

Ann Marie Fiore
Iowa State University, amfiore@iastate.edu

Linda S. Niehm
Iowa State University, niehmlin@iastate.edu

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Keywords

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Comments

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Miyoung Jeong

Associate Professor
mjeong@iastate.edu

Ann Marie Fiore

Professor
amfiore@iastate.edu

Linda Niehm

Associate Professor
niehmlin@iastate.edu

Apparel, Educational Studies, & Hospitality Management
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

Introduction

Small, rural businesses increasingly recognize the importance of developing an effective Web presence in order to be competitive. Whereas small firms may have difficulties in implementing the same advanced technologies of larger firms, they are able to enhance online marketing strategies and create a unique firm image. Building "firm image" (i.e., unique, positive feelings and meanings associated with a company) is seen as vital to differentiating one's business from competitors, which is important for business success (Aaker, 1996). Moreover, offering a consistent image between a firm's brick-and-mortar location and its Web site is essential to delivering a clear message about the business and enhancing customer value (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997). This same distinctive image must be conveyed through all customer contact points (store, Web site, marketing communications) to

enhance competitiveness for rural firms in today's marketplace.

In addition to creating a unique yet consistent firm image, rural businesses need to develop an experience-rich Web presence. Implementation beyond a basic Web site will be increasingly necessary for small rural firms to meet changing customer needs and expectations and to expand their customer base beyond the local or regional market. Failure to implement an experiential, interactive, and distinctive Web presence will ultimately create a negative image in the eye of today's technology-savvy consumer (Foss, Henderson, Johnson, Murray, & Stone, 2002). To successfully compete in the e-commerce market, presentation of business offerings on the Web should give potential customers engaging and memorable experiences that lead to actual purchases online or in the brick-and-mortar location.

Applying Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy (4E) concepts to Web site design for small rural retail and hospitality businesses (i.e., bed and breakfast, restaurant, retail, and rural tourism), the authors have developed an educational module to help these businesses build a unique and experiential Web site that is consistent with their physical stores. Implementing 4E (Educational, Entertainment, Esthetic, and Escapist experience) strategies can help create an experience-rich, interactive, and distinctive Web presence.

Research supports the importance of an experiential Web site to enhance enjoyment and to positively affect consumer responses such as purchasing products and cultivating positive attitudes towards a business (e.g., Aladwani & Palvia, 2002; Fiore, Jin, & Kim, 2005; Liu & Arnett, 2000; Mathwick, Malhorta, & Rigdon, 2001; Shih, 1998). However, guidelines for using 4E strategies to develop an experience-rich Web site have not been available.

Many small firms lack knowledge concerning online business strategies, have limited technology budgets, and face technological limitations of rural communities. As a consequence, many have relied on development of their brick-and-mortar operations and local customer demand. This project provides an educational module with value-added Web site design techniques that build on the strengths of their brick-and-mortar operations to create new competitive options for small rural firms. The module content is of value to business owners/operators, business consultants, and Extension professionals who assist small rural firms.

An Educational Module for Developing Experiential Web sites

An educational module is available online of the Southern Rural Development Center at <http://srdc.msstate.edu/ecommerce/07training/proceedings.html>. This module introduces the importance of building a consistent firm image and 4E concepts, as well as provides Web site development principles and guidelines that incorporate these concepts. Small rural business owners/operators and their Web site designers should consult this module when creating or redesigning their Web site to foster a consistent business image and a memorable, engaging Web experience.

Content of Lessons

The module is broken into five lessons with multiple examples, accompanied by two assessment tools and a training guide for Extension professionals. The five lessons may be presented by Extension professionals or used as self-guided instruction by small business. The module consists of the following.

Lesson 1 introduces concepts of Pine and Gilmore's experience economy and discusses the four realms of experience (4Es: Educational, Esthetic, Escapist, and Entertainment experiences) as a means for adding value and unique competitive advantages for small rural businesses. Each of the 4Es is defined and appropriate experiential Web site examples are provided for the four types of business settings noted above.

Lesson 2 presents how a differentiation strategy could add value and enhance the customer experience when used by small rural businesses. The 4E strategies help to differentiate a business from its competitors. Customers are attracted to the added value offered by experiences unique to the business.

Lesson 3 focuses on key Web site development strategies for multi-channel businesses that market and sell through physical stores, catalogs, direct mail, and Web sites, stressing a consistent firm image in the process of value creation.

Lesson 4 provides small rural business owners/operators with a step-by-step framework for developing an online marketing plan based on the core concepts of the 4Es, along with a practical assessment tool to facilitate the actual process of preparing an online marketing plan. Assessment Tool I contains real world examples, guiding

principles, practical worksheets, and information that can help small rural business owners/operators complete a 4E-based marketing plan for their business.

Lesson 5 stresses how to create a Web site that engages customers in a unique experience, which results in a strong bond to the business. It illustrates how small rural business owners/operators can reinforce the 4E offerings and make the most of unique aspects of the business' goods, services, and supporting core online marketing mix (4Ps). The 4Ps in this project (property, product presentation, promotional application, and people) are slightly modified from the classic, product-oriented 4Ps of marketing (product, price, promotion, and place) and are adapted for a 4E-based marketing plan (see Fiore, Niehm, Oh, Jeong, & Hausafus, 2007 for more information).

Three key components of Web site design, Information, Interface, and Interactivity (3Is), are presented, accompanied by an assessment tool to help the firm improve its Web site. Assessment Tool II provides a systematic way to evaluate and improve the 3Is of the business Web site, to better contribute to the 4Es, and to reinforce value from the 4Ps of the business.

Extension Professionals' Training Guide

The educators' training guide describes how Extension professionals can use accompanying materials on the CDROM and offers plans for introducing the CDROM in a 1-hour and a 3-hour training session. Extension professionals are encouraged to adapt and modify the information to better meet the needs of their rural business clientele. Illustrative local business Web sites may supplement Web site examples offered in the Lessons.

Concluding Remarks

This module provides Extension professionals with materials to help small rural business owners strengthen their competitive advantage by incorporating 4E strategies in their Web sites. Using this module, Extension professionals may help small rural business owners/operators identify their unique and experiential business offerings that should be incorporated into their Web sites to deliver a consistent image. Copious real-world Web site examples in this module assist in understanding 4E concept applications.

The two Assessment Tools can be used by Extension professionals and business owners/operators to assess online marketing plans and Web site design strategies and apply experience-rich features to business offerings. Finally, the training guide for Extension professionals is a useful tool to help develop interactive in-class activities, incorporating presentations for diverse audiences.

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