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Don't chase your Web site visitors away >

Executive Summary:
Visitor to customer—here's how the Web site should work.

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If you've decided that you want to be more proactive in converting your Web site visitors into clients or customers, you might have considered adding a form to your site that asks them to submit information about themselves.

You might even have considered requiring that they give you their contact information in order to view certain parts of your site.

Before you do this, consider these informal poll results. When asked, "When a Web site requires you to give your e-mail address to view content, what do you do?" Five percent of respondents reported, "I give my e-mail address"; 38 percent responded, "I leave the site immediately"; and, 57 percent indicated, "Sometimes I give my e-mail address; sometimes I don't." In conversation, the most common comment was, "I give a fake address."

Don't run the risk of alienating as many as 95 percent of your Web site's visitors by implementing a no-holds-barred, prisoner-taking data capture policy. Here are some guidelines for implementing visitor-friendly Web site forms:

Offer something in exchange. If you want a visitor to give you his e-mail address, offer something of value in return: a newsletter, a coupon, or a free e-book. Be creative. But don't make the disclosure of personal information a requirement for visitors to view your content. If you ask for information before a visitor can see what you have to offer, there's a very good chance that you'll lose a lot of visitors and collect a lot of fake e-mail addresses.

Ask for only the information you need. Brian Duvall of Duvall Media recommends a simple opt-in form that asks for only your visitor's name and e-mail address. "The opt-in forms that I see tend to be way too long, asking for way too much unnecessary information too early in the sales process," says Duvall.

Provide what you promise. If a visitor goes to the trouble of filling out a form, she should get what you have offered quickly and easily.

Display your own contact information prominently. "Our 'Request Literature' form has generated some contacts, but having our phone number on the site is important, too," reports Steve Huffman of Turman Log Homes in Hillsville.

Have reasonable expectations. Zach Thompson of RYP Marketing in Daleville reports, "I am amazed at the number of people who complete a contact form, but despite being called and e-mailed will never contact you back."

Have a privacy policy that discloses how you are going to use the data you collect. The Better Business Bureau has a great sample policy at www.bbbonline.org/Privacy/sample_privacy.asp that you can customize to suit your site. If you're going to send e-mails to people who give you their contact information, make sure that the opt-out procedure appears at the bottom of every e-mail you send them. This is required by law.

If you treat your visitors respectfully, offer something of value, and provide information about yourself to them, your Web site forms will be as asset, rather than a liability, to your business.