

# Web Marketing of Turf: Beyond the Electronic Billboard

Whether you design your own website or hire a professional web designer, there are several elements that must be incorporated if the site is to be an effective marketing tool. Dr. Phil Busey discusses those in this article.

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When I first designed web sites in 1997, after decades of working with computers, it was still a challenge. I had to start with one of the "Dummies" guides. After some bumps on the digital road, the web has become a valuable tool for me to deliver education to students. Equally important, it has helped market a program.

Students find, through my websites, the University of Florida Turfgrass Science academic program. Besides student recruitment, the web has improved public relations with colleagues and research supporters, and is developing a community of people interested in better turf and who appreciate its environmental role.

My two most popular websites each generate over 500 visitors per day, and hundreds of users have subscribed to and/or registered for turf information exchanges, including mailing lists and the on-line Turfgrass Forums located at <http://turfgrass.com> (see inset). This is all about teaching the science of turfgrass, but the activity is marketing.

I have learned valuable lessons that apply to marketing sod as well as to education. I hope this experience can help cut your costs of web development and maximize the usefulness of websites in the business of turf. Unfortunately, the vast majority of sod websites repeatedly fail minimal tests of usability (see inset), thus we should ask, "Why bother?"

## Marketing is About Relationships with People

Despite all the bells and whistles, the HTML, the servers and the databases, effective marketing comes back to relationships with people. Marketing is the process of cultivating relationships to find out

people's needs, and to shape a product to address those needs, which you will exchange for the satisfaction of both you and your customers.

If the web doesn't serve in some way to make happy customers, it's of little value. Unfortunately, the vast majority of sod websites are inadequate for marketing. They might as well be electronic billboards, but even at that they do a poor job. They are mostly sluggish, uninformative and don't do a good enough job of branding your products. You and your colleagues in sod production are apparently doing a great job of marketing in the real world, but (with some exceptions) the websites do not yet show the same care and attention.

## Web Basics

The web is the accumulated total of all linked documents throughout the world. By "document," I mean text, images and programs that can write text and images.

A "link" or "hyperlink" is like a footnote or reference in a document that points to another document or a place within the same document. When your web visitor chooses to "click a hyperlink" in your website, a new text document and images are transported to the client's computer, and she can read new information on her computer screen.

***"The links within your website can lead potential clients to helpful information, still keeping them within your website."***

Other forms of communication generally do not "hyperlink," that is, generally do not give the client direct and immediate access to related information.

Hyperlinking makes the web powerful. Links bring visitors to your web site, based on listings in search engines. The links within your website can (or should) lead potential clients to helpful information, still keeping them within your website. This goodwill is the start of a relationship.

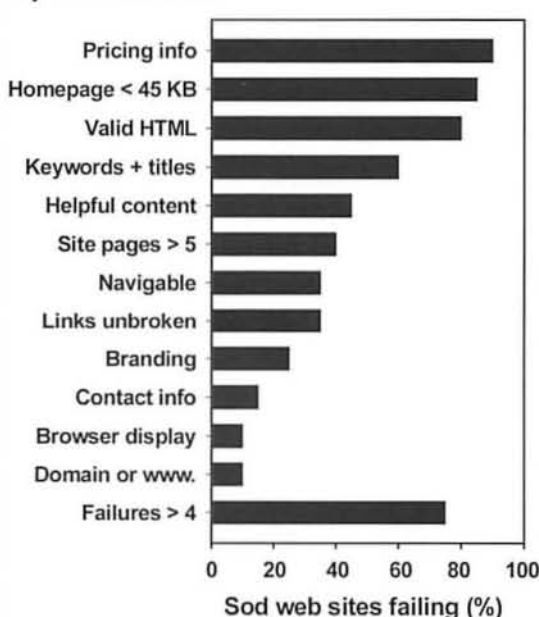
In time, the links will lead clients to possibly telephone you for an order for sod or other turf products, or better yet, make an instant on-line purchase if your web site has some kind of shopping cart system.

Unlike direct mail and many other forms of advertising, the website is relatively non-intrusive and, once the site is properly designed and created, it works for the turfgrass producer 24-7, and is relatively inexpensive to maintain.

## Sod Website Usability Survey

To assess the status of sod websites, I conducted a usability survey. A sample of 20 sites was randomly generated from a population of 422 websites, representing all listed

## Specifications:







## Web Marketing *continued from page 22*

you. Keeping in mind the issues of security and privacy, such systems can reach out to a different type of customer than you may be serving at present.

There are other advanced ways to generate traffic including on-line discussion forums, news, spray calculators, redirection of traffic from other websites, and an effectively managed periodical mailing list.

Because of the perishability of sod and its limited range of distribution, turfgrass producers have not been in the forefront of on-line sales or marketing. That is expected to change with the merger of turfgrass producers, the increasing number of back-haulers who are using the web to plan their trucking routes, and the increasing sophistication of the buyers.

Websites sometimes get into trouble by being too "advanced," using cutting-edge tools that are not universally compatible in all operating systems. Some of the things that get web designers in trouble are Java (which is distinctively different from JavaScript), Flash, frames and scrolling text (whatever the implementation).

## Marketing Sod on the Web

Marketing is more than sales, advertising, promotion and public relations. Marketing is about coming back to the customers' needs, again and again. Your web designer can help you sell your products on a website, without knowing anything about the product. However, he may not necessarily do a good job of it without help from the turfgrass producer who knows the existing market.

A simple tool such as analysis of access logs will tell you how visitors found your website. Access logs record the keywords, the search terms, that people used to find your site. By analyzing the kinds of things people are asking for, you may get a "heads-up" on marketing possibilities. By seamlessly tracking web visitors (while respecting their privacy rights), you may determine which web marketing approaches are most effective for generating sales.

The website can help you position your products relative to your competition's. It can integrate well with other marketing tools which include print media, radio, word-of-mouth, testimonials, a smile and a handshake.

## FOCUS: ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

### Website Specification

### Explanation

Pricing information

Price of sod should be listed on the website, ideally, to bring customers who like to shop.

Home page bandwidth  
< 45 Kb

This relatively small digital weight of the home page (including images) will enable 12 seconds down load time over fast modems; larger pages would be much slower.

Valid HTML

There should be no open tags, missing HTML elements or other coding errors. While some "work-around" errors are not significant, others will cause browser compatibility problems. Some web authoring tools write notoriously bad code.

Keywords in metatags, page titles

Appropriate keywords must be placed in hidden metatags to assist search engines in indexing the site; webpages must each have a distinctive title, for the same purpose.

Helpful content

The sod website must go beyond describing the product to actually tell the client something useful, e.g., how to install and care for the product.

Site pages >5

Multiple web pages must be used to attract a higher number of visitors, and provide information.

Navigable

The home page must prominently display links to the subpages, and the subpages have links back to the home page and to one another.

Links unbroken

Every hyperlink on the site must lead to an existing page elsewhere on the website or (rarely) to another website.

Branding

The brand identity of the turfgrass producer must be obvious on each web page, through text headings and a graphic image.

Contact information

The address of the turfgrass producer, including the state or province where the sod farm exists, preferably also the country, and a phone number, must be easy to find.

Browser displays page so they are readable Domain accessed directly or as www

The web pages must not have major design errors, so text does not disappear underneath images, and there are no other glaring page design errors. The web site visitor must not have to type "www." as part of the web address; just typing the domain name should be sufficient.

Unless you set up an on-line ordering system, a website will not make all the difference in the world, but it can support and enhance other efforts. You may have some customers who will never use it, many customers who will look at your website just once, and others who use it extensively.

Most business people probably do not need to know the difference between

HTML and XHTML to make good use of the web for marketing turfgrass. But they should be more involved to determine if their website is functional, especially when accessed over a modem.



### Info Central

**Key Words:** web, marketing, website  
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# Turf News

THE ONLY MAGAZINE DEVOTED EXCLUSIVELY TO TURFGRASS PRODUCTION  
A PUBLICATION OF TURFGRASS PRODUCERS INTERNATIONAL



TPI Summer  
Convention & Field Day  
July 16-19, 2002  
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Spending a few minutes to become reacquainted with the Website just might prompt a new idea. – page 18



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## FROM THE TPI PRESIDENT

Tom Keeven

By now, you should have received the new CD that TPI—in conjunction with ITPF—have developed for members to use in educating the public about water conservation and the benefits of turfgrass sod. If you haven't already done so, take a few minutes to review its contents and consider how you can use it to become pro-active.

You'll find the CD contains two complete PowerPoint *WATER RIGHT* presentations—plus simple instructions—and, all of it really is easy to use. The two complete presentations are targeted at educating varying audiences:

1. **Green Industry PowerPoint Presentation** ...for audiences involved in the design, installation, maintenance of landscapes or those who produce plant materials... professionals who

share many of the same water-related concerns.

2. **Policy & Users PowerPoint Presentation**...for water policy decision-makers or others interested in water-use generally and landscape water-use specifically offers more scientific background and information related to water use and its environmental benefits.

As your president, I urge you to take an active role by presenting this information to as many people in your area as possible...as quickly as possible. Again it's up to us, as turfgrass professionals, to get solid information into the hands of users and decision makers.

I'd like to take a moment to once again thank the people on the Water Right committee. This is a very dedicated group of producers who worked hard, along with the TPI staff, in the development of these tools to better the turf industry. Among all the organizations I've belonged to in the past I've never witnessed such commitment. Thank you!

*President continued on page 8*



## TPI STAFF COLUMN

Doug Fender

For the past couple of years, ITPF and TPI have devoted a lot of resources (including significant contributions from many members) to a single subject...water. Some people may be of the opinion that the organizations have become too focused on this single issue. Let's talk.

First, I'd ask everyone to look through this and past issues of Turf News magazine to see the breadth and depth of topics covered that are not water.

Next, look at the past and upcoming TPI meetings. While there has been attention paid to water, it has not been exclusive. The Program

Planning Committee works for balance.

But most importantly, think about a basic reason the organizations exist...to help keep all members abreast of the latest factors that could impact or influence the success of their operations. Nothing can be more important than water, or more precisely, the lack of water.

Throughout much of the world, and particularly large segments of the U.S., severe droughts are taking place and expected to continue. Droughts can be devastating, but typically they are relatively short-lived. Its the long-term water-use policies arising from drought reactions that can cause greater problems for turf producers and those firms that provide them with equipment and services.

At a recent national drinking water symposium, keynote speaker Senator

*Staff Column continued on page 8*