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Professional Service Firms Should Rethink Their Online Presence

How to Create an Effective Online Presence for a Professional Service Firm

There are now new and improved ways for engaging with clients. Professional service firms need to accept that the business environment has dramatically changed. It's now characterized by crowded marketplaces, eroding client trust and increased complexity.

Modern day professional service buyers have access to more information about products and services. They no longer depend on outbound marketing channels (think broadcast TV, prints, radio, etc.) for advertisements. In fact, they consider them intrusive.

Social technologies have also made it easier for them to showcase their own opinions of a particular brand and as a result, their buying decisions are influenced by their peers. This has resulted in more complex client journeys.

The implication is you need to adapt to the digital age or risk a stagnating brand. You can't deny that competition is set to come thick and fast especially when a Professional Services Market Global Report by The Business Research Company, forecasts a 5.4% growth rate from 2016 to 2020.

So how can you maintain a competitive advantage in today's complex business environment?



By building a meaningful business brand that screams digital. Numbers from a global study by Havas Media of over 300,000 people and 1,500 brands, show that meaningful brands outperform others on the stock market by 206% over a ten-year period.

Through this primer, we will discuss some of the ways a professional service firm can use to create an effective online presence which will in effect, turn it into a meaningful brand.

Creating an Effective Online Presence

An effective online presence means that a professional service firm can target prospective clients with content that has greater relevance to the audience via digital platforms where they spend significant time.

Here's a look at some of the ways you can go about achieving this.

Have the Right Logo

Did you know that it only takes professional service buyers 10 seconds to form a first impression of a brand's logo, but it takes 5-7 impressions for them to recognize the logo?



The point here is that you need to choose your logo correctly. Let's look at some of the qualities of a good professional services logo:

- Simplicity. Simple logos are memorable. The easier it is for your target audience to remember your logo, the better your brand awareness will be.
- Targeted. Your logo needs to appeal to the individuals you are trying to target. A creative agency, for instance, will have a much different look and feel compared to a law firm.
- Versatility. You can't argue with the fact that the best logos look great no matter where they're found. Regardless of its size, or if it is in print, digital or other media, a great logo makes a strong impression.
- Appropriate. Does the logo reinforce your value proposition, does it reflect the tone, style and colors that you want your clients to see.
- Timeless. Is the logo timeless? Will some of the graphics be outdated a few years from now?
- Memorable and Professional. Make sure that you have a memorable logo, one that is different than your competitors. Your logo should convey a clear message of your brand and your professional services.

Use the Right Color Scheme

Statistics show that the right color can improve readership by 40% by making messaging easier to read and more visually appealing.

You need to think carefully about the color scheme you choose for your logo. Blue and green are often the most frequently used colors for professional service firms. Blue offers some additional benefits which include:

- Pretty much everyone can see blue, while red/green color blindness is fairly common.
- Blue is the most common favorite color for both men and women in the United States.
- Blue is psychologically associated with trust and confidence.

Make sure you use color purposefully as it accentuates your company logo and your corporate color palette. Also make sure that the palette is consistent across all of your media and it will appeal to the personas you are targeting.

The bottom line here is that it is safer to use colors that appeal to your professional service buyers and differentiate using your value proposition, content, and design.

Choose a Proper Website Theme

Although designers would prefer otherwise, most professional service firms do not need a custom developed website. Over 25% of the millions of sites that are online use the Wordpress platform.



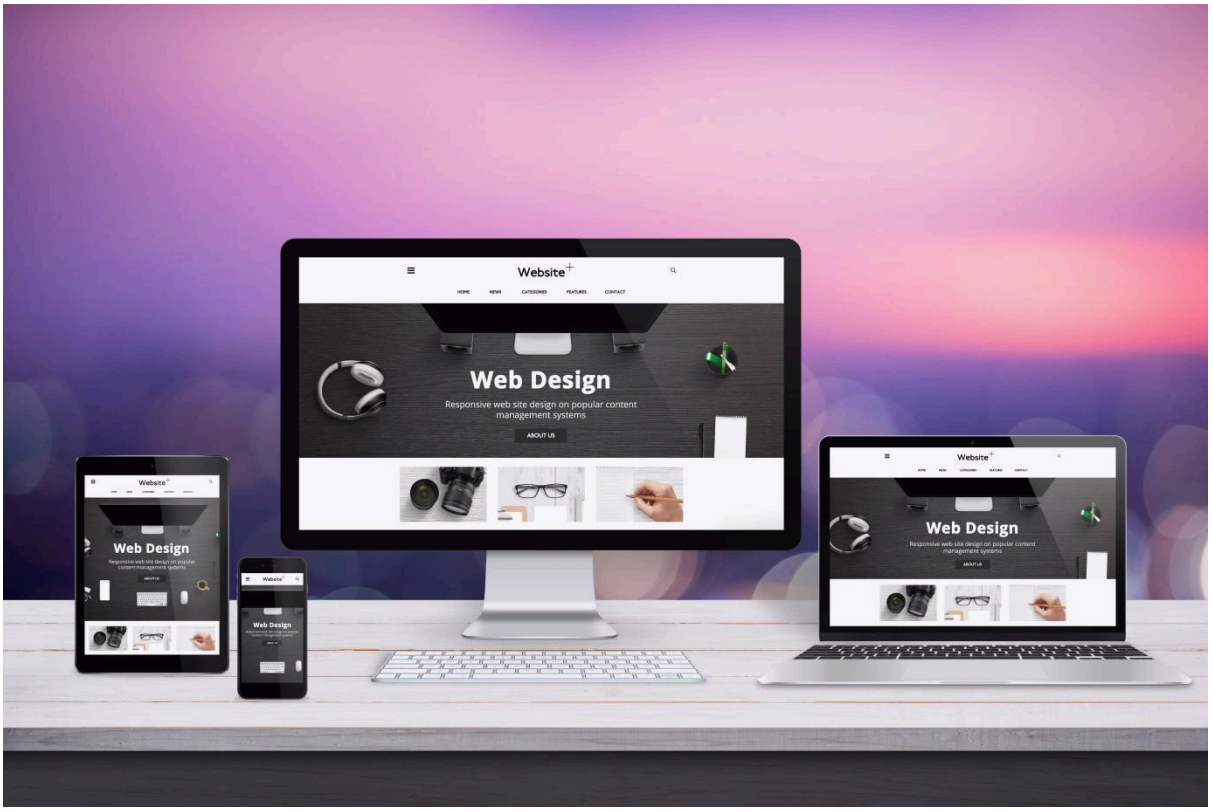
The benefits of using Wordpress include:

- Thousands of professional service themes allow you to launch and change the design of your website quickly. There are thousands of themes available for WordPress.
- Plugins allow you to extend the functionality of your WordPress site without knowing how to program. There are over 10,000 plugins available that help you add all kinds of functionality to your sites, like social media sharing, SEO, security, and much more.
- They are easy to update. Once it is set up, you can update it anytime you want, and that is important for engagement with your clients and for the search engines.
- Google loves WordPress sites. Because they are updated more frequently, and the content tends to be structured well, you can get a WordPress site ranking very quickly compared to a static website.
- WordPress is supported by a thriving, engaged community. You can find a Wordpress designer anywhere and if you provide them the appropriate guidance you can save thousands of dollars.

Include Best-in-Class Design Features

Numbers from a research by Econsultancy show that 95% of professional service buyers believe that a positive user experience is the most important factor when they visit a website.

Another study by Forrester highlights that a proper design could increase your website's conversion rate by 200 to 400%.



Although there are exceptions, we recommend that most professional service firms follow some simple best practices:

- Avoid clip art, use a lot of pictures, preferably not stock photos.
- If you have a process or system, highlight it; it helps you stand out and builds credibility.
- Make sure you use a variety of media if possible, including icons, pictures, video.
- Use sub-tabs so your menu does not look so overwhelming, try to avoid more than 6 main level tabs.
- Use a consistent template format for navigation, headers, text, typography and hyperlinks.
- Make sure content flows from one block to another without overwhelming the visitor. Give users a clear and consistent structure they can follow.
- Make sure you provide enough white space throughout the design. White space not only helps reduce the cognitive load of visitors, it makes it much easier for users to segment and digest the information presented.
- Think through your desired visitor path and present clear call to actions to guide them along the way. Plan on these early in the development process so they can be included in the design in a cohesive and non-obstructive manner.
- Check Browser Rendering. Does your browser perform well across all major browsers and operating systems? A cross browser check is worth the time, as many browsers do render website differently.

Content is King

I know you totally agree with the phrase- content is “king!” You also agree with the fact that it’s hard for targeted audiences to react to your content promptly especially when you consider that prospective clients are being exposed to so many brand messages.

Professional service buyers’ attention spans have shortened. They are subject to more information than ever before; they consume so many inbound marketing messages every day and as a result, this makes it harder to cut through.



So, how can your professional service firm stand above the rest and deliver content that outplays the hundreds of other competing messages? Here’s how:

- In inbound marketing, content is key. Ensure that you post top-notch/high-quality industry content as it will set you apart from other professional service firms you compete with and help you to earn the trust of prospective clients.
- Ensure that your content (think blog posts, whitepapers, E-books, infographics, etc.) reinforces your value proposition and sets the right tone for the persona you have developed.
- Ensure that your website content is free of spelling errors, properly edited and written in the author’s native language.

- Ensure that your content is simple enough so a majority of the target audience can easily understand it and thus stay longer on your site.
- Ensure that you constantly create and publish new content as this will keep prospects coming for more. The best way to achieve this is to set publishing goals and execute them.
- Ensure that you cover topics that are relevant to your professional service firm and your target market; to research on topic ideas you can look at industry conferences agenda or LinkedIn groups your clients are on, or share use cases on how you solve clients' problems.
- Remember to write for your humans and not the search engines - though you cannot ignore keywords.
- As a professional service firm you are selling the expertise of your people, therefore, make sure you have strong bios for your key staff. You can also use testimonials and case studies to demonstrate your expertise.
- Keep in mind that professional service buyers buy based on outcomes and not processes so if you have "proof statements" that demonstrate the value you add, use them. For instance, a marketing firm may say- "through our efforts we were able to demonstrate 60% more qualified leads."

Leverage Social Media

To grow and scale your business in today's competitive business environment, you need to keep your existing and prospective clients happy and engaged.



A social media strategy can enable your professional service firm to adopt a client-centric culture, an agile mind-set and also be able to continually respond and execute on client feedback.

As a result, your firm, and more so your employees, can adopt an iterative, test and lean approach that will enhance product development and client experience based on feedback and data from your social media platforms.

To create a solid social media strategy, consider the following tips:

- Integrate social media buttons in your website- social channels allow for a richer client experience; these social platforms allow professional service buyers to interact directly with businesses and brands, thus creating a dialogue with them. Make sure the icons are easily identifiable, and that they link to your social media accounts, as well as traditional sharing icons on posts so content can be quickly shared across social media networks.
- Use the right social media accounts- There are many social media platforms that you can choose from (think Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, etc.). You need to understand the nature of each channel to be able to use it appropriately. Ask yourself where do most of your prospective clients spend their time? Well, LinkedIn leads the way as it is the largest professional social network. Consider creating a LinkedIn account.
- Once you've leveraged the right social media channels, ensure that you provide content on a regular basis. You can use some of the automation tools (think Hootsuite, Buffer, etc.) available on the market to help you and your workforce automate otherwise complex social media processes thereby driving greater efficiencies from your social channels.
- Make sure that the content you share is relevant and resonates emotionally with your client base as this will increase the likelihood of people sharing your content or talking about it with their own network.
- Social activity influences organic search, so share your own content regularly and encourage others to do so as well. You can also take it a notch higher and design a brand advocacy program that will encourage sharing and reward brand advocates.
- And finally, remember that social media is about interaction, which means you must actively connect with your followers, share third-party content, and communicate via tweets, likes, comments, etc. Ensure that you not only address positive comments but also negative ones.

Always Include Call-to-Actions

Studies show that 90% of people who look at your website will read your CTAs and if they are embedded in your text, your conversion rate will increase by over 120%.



Therefore, as prospective clients come to your website, ensure you have a clear call to action for each stage of the buyer's journey.

A typical buyer's journey normally takes the following format:

1. Awareness– a professional service buyer becomes aware of your site and your expertise.
2. Interaction– a professional service buyer enjoys your blog, so they sign up for your newsletter.
3. Value added giveaway– trust begins to develop, and they are willing to provide you some information about their firm in exchange for some value added information which highlights your firm's expertise.
4. Action– you have demonstrated you are a trusted advisor to the professional service buyer.
5. Client– a client buys your services.

Final Thoughts

Professional service firms need to recognise that the business landscape is fast changing and consequently, client expectations are continually evolving.

They need to reposition their brands as a result of these changes and understand that the true value of a professional service firm is determined by a number of factors from the quality of the service and customer service through to its online presence.

A well-developed online presence can help a professional service firm differentiate its services, create and maintain a competitive edge, and build client loyalty.

The above-mentioned strategies will go a long way in helping you create an effective online presence that will ensure that your services, and also client experiences deliver clear and consistent expressions of your professional service firm's brand.

Your website is an extension of your firm. When prospects come to your site, they will begin to make a decision as to whether or not they want to engage you. Are you leaving them with the right impression?

Get your FREE audit of your website today so you can start gaining more clients tomorrow.

Give us your feedback and comments, we want to hear from you!