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The Unwritten Rules of Advertising on Forums

By Martin Avis

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There are thousands of newsgroups and forums online. They provide a fascinating and useful insight into the minds and methods of others who share our interests. They also act as an amazing resource for finding out almost anything you need to know.

Want your website critiqued? Ask at a forum.
Want to know how to salvage Outlook? Ask at a forum.
Want to know if a particular book is worth buying? Ask at a forum.

Almost anything is fair game – providing it is reasonably on topic. And dropping in to forums is a great way for newcomers to a field to rub shoulders with the old hands.

This openness leads to a temptation that is repeated over and over again. "Ah," many people think, "a highly targeted market! I must post an ad for my site and watch them beat my door down to buy my wares."

Wrong. That is the fastest way to oblivion.

Forums are not advertising notice boards. They are not like the pin board in the kitchen that anyone can put up a 'for sale' ad on.

Forums are much more like the coffee machine or the water cooler. People hang out, swap ideas, chat for a

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while. They don't want someone popping up every five minutes trying to sell them something. They are trying to chill out.

That is the warning. But like all warnings, it has a caveat: there are ways to get your advertising message across – if you follow the unwritten rules.

So I figured I'd write those unwritten rules down.

The key to 'advertising' on forums and newsgroups is not to.

As soon as you put up a post that even looks remotely like an ad, you will usually either be removed by a moderator or flamed by incensed members. Quite right. They didn't ask for your commercial break and they certainly don't appreciate your intrusion.

Then, the worst thing of all happens: your reputation is shot. Anyone in business should have a mind to the long term. It is pointless to try to make money from one promotion – the real value of marketing is repeat business. Spam the boards and forums and you will quickly find that the word spreads. Nobody will want to do business with you.

It isn't just buyers you will put off. The most successful people online harness the power of joint ventures – doing a deal with another marketer to sell your product for a commission. If you become known as a spammer, joint ventures will be a closed avenue for you. Nobody will touch you.

But don't despair. There is a solution. It is to take a softly, softly approach.

First, read every post on your target boards. Look out for recurring themes as they will often guide you to areas you can research. Many an info product has been born from questions raised on forums.

Next, whenever there is a question or comment that you can add to – do so. Answer questions generously and without trying to push any product or service.

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If the board allows it (and it is vital to check the 'rules'), put a very short link to your site in your signature line. But on no account mention it in your message.

For example, I might sign myself off like this:

Martin Avis
www.BizE-zine.com – Free Business Insights Every Friday

Every once in a while ask a relevant question. And always graciously thank anyone who answers you, even if you don't agree with them. That way you are not just being polite, but you are also doubling your postings. Never, ever enter into an argument over someone's reply to you – however rude they may seem.

Over time, you will become a known member of the board. People will appreciate your input and you will become an accepted member.

When that time comes, you can begin to occasionally mention your service or product in posts, providing the relevancy is absolutely clear. But only those.

This way, the boards will become an excellent marketing medium for you.

Any other way and you will get nowhere.

If this all sounds in any way cynical, I guess it is. But it is based on the real, hard reality of Internet etiquette: 'People do business with people they like'. Add 'trust' to that and you see the whole picture.

Martin Avis is a management and training consultant. His free weekly newsletter, BizE-zine, is packed with articles, interviews and quotes to help you be the best in business or Internet marketing. <mailto:subscribe5@BizE-zine.com> or visit his information-packed website at <http://www.BizE-zine.com>

Creating Online Communities

By George Hubka

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Looking for somewhere online to meet new people, discuss hobbies, plan events, or just have fun chatting? Online forums have been around for some time on the internet and often free and easy to setup. Forums are basically online discussion web sites where people share information and chat grouped around a set of topics. One example might be a local photography club. You could setup topics around types of cameras, locations for shooting, local events and meetings, printing tips, etc. Often there are administrators and moderators that help to keep the discussion orderly and on topic.

Some items to consider when starting an online forum include...

Cost - Often you can find them for free. There will probably be some advertising on the site, but don't most sites now a days?

Features - Does the forum support avatars, private messages, user levels, themes, etc.

Security - Is it possible to create forums that only register users can post in? Helps to avoid those spammers.

I cannot stress the last one enough. You should be completely able to control who is in your forums. One bad apple spoils the bunch. On that same note, it is common for a forums to have moderators. These are people that help enforce the rules in the forum. Make sure your choose your help wisely. When it comes to administrators, there should only ever be one. Administrators have the keys to the city and can set your forum ablaze.

Finally to make a forum a success you need to attract people to it to join. Obviously if it is for a church or some other established group, this is relatively easy. Tell your friends, family, club members. If you are starting from scratch, do the same. Tell people, show people, invite people. Check to see if your forum site is listed in search engines like google. Once you get past that initial setup and recruitment your will soon be on your way to having a forum that you and your friends can enjoy.

George Hubka has a masters degree in software engineering has been building and running web sites for more than a decade. Visit

<http://www.AtTheForum.com>

to get started with your own online

community today!



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