

Driving Traffic to Your Website that Talks to You



Every morning I stop by a coffee shop to get my favorite tea. I have to drive through a newer shopping center in the suburbs to get there. Before the shopping center was constructed, engineers considered traffic flow and planned how the streets would be laid out. From a bird's eye view, I am sure the streets make perfect sense; there is one main street that forms a semi-circle coming off the existing highway. Drives come off of the semi-circle street like legs off a centipede, feeding traffic into the parking areas. The problem is the centipede does not have enough legs, so traffic is chronically backed up. It backs up into the parking area and people are stuck in their parking spaces. Some of the centipede drives are "Entrance Only," meaning you cannot turn out, which forces traffic to block up. Drivers must wait and become frustrated. Inevitably, frustrated people start ignoring the signs and do what they want to do.

I like using traffic analogies when talking about websites. The parallels are natural; people navigating to get to where they want to go. Engineers, be they civil or computer, ideally design systems that minimize crashes. In the end though, the users take control and anything can happen.

- This is an important point to consider when starting a web project. You cannot control the paths users will take when they come to your website. They might start on the homepage or they might enter through a page that came up when they did a search on Google. Once they get to the site, each visitor will have a goal of their own and browse accordingly. So how can you plan for this to assure your goals are met too?

First, identify your key audiences and consider all their goals. Next, compare those goals with your own goals for the user and ensure that there is significant overlap. To ensure that the goals are easily achievable, design a navigation system that is intuitive and consistent on all pages both for those users who enter from the homepage as well as those who do not. Those are the basics, road signs and pavement; next we can look at the centipede legs. We can use analytic tools to look at the paths users take when they come to the site. We will know where they go, how they get there and how much time they spend on each page and nobody needs to sit in the hot sun with a clipboard counting traffic. This information can be used to really understand your visitor. On a basic level this knowledge can provide insight in determining:

- The key interests of the audience
- What does not interest the audience
- If a form is asking too much or is confusing
- Where your visitors are coming from

Knowing this can help you:

- Develop or enhance areas of the site that are of key interest
- Drop or revamp the areas that are not visited
- Fine tune information obtained from the visitor
- Know the search engines on which to focus your marketing or SEO efforts

All of these factors should be considered when hiring a firm to build your site. Find a company that is trained in all aspects of effective web building and not merely a trailblazer that wants to use your site as a learning opportunity. You can't afford to back up traffic and frustrate people with poor design; your competitors' sites are just a click away.