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A new approach to 'new' media.

Luke Farley and Chris Grannell present a new framework to help marketers influence, sharpen and build their strategic planning process in the online environment.

New media' isn't new any more; but it continues to be both misunderstood and undervalued by many marketers. In fact, the very term 'new media' should give us cause for alarm because of what it tells us about how marketers still view the internet. It suggests that some members of the marketing community remain unfamiliar with its use, and it indicates that many practitioners consider it just another 'medium'.

In this light, it seems fair to conclude that many marketers are still unfamiliar with the internet and are consequently failing to utilise its full potential as a marketing channel for both communications and distribution. (Note: in reading this article it is important to remember that 'the internet' is the physical global open-source network that underpins websites, email, applications and so on; not the websites, world wide web or applications themselves.)

Some progress, however, has been made from the days when 'the internet' was simply a bolt-on or afterthought to the marketing plan. Today, most marketers recognise that the internet's unique features present opportunities to: 1) enrich the customer experience in ways that both complement and enhance other marketing channels; and 2) connect with a whole new (often difficult to reach) prospect set.

The trouble is, marketers are often unsure what the unique features of the internet are.

In our experience, two common types of mistakes continue to be made within the internet marketing field. Both are driven by the formal role or mindset of the responsible individuals. These are:

- ❖ the old-school marketer simply deploys offline marketing methodology online with little modification, and
- ❖ the technologist focuses on tools, features and applications, but fails to consider their potential contribution to the marketing effort (or relevance to the wider marketing mix).

The flaw in the first case is that the internet's unique characteristics remain ignored if we simply borrow approaches from offline communication channels (say print media, with its meticulous graphic design and typography; or television advertising, with its focus on storytelling) and merely transplant these into the online world. Equally problematic, a technical understanding of internet-based technologies can provide only limited value in the formulation of internet marketing strategies. Many marketers can speak intelligently about technology platforms and applications that run on the internet, but this doesn't necessarily translate into a successful internet marketing strategy. Applications and tools are tactics, not strategies.

In the context of marketing through the internet, while it is useful for marketers to learn about new and improved technologies as point solutions, to put together any cohesive online marketing strategy we must take a step back and contemplate the broader consequences of the internet as a marketing channel – encompassing both communications and distribution.

In this article, rather than discussing specific technologies or applications in detail, we present a comprehensive model for understanding, planning for and evaluation of the use of the internet as a marketing channel. The model is called AIM9.

WHY THE TITLE, AIM9?

The acronym 'AIM' stands for the three fundamental areas that are described by the model (audience, interactivity and management), while '9' refers to the number of dimensions within them. Moreover, the end result of the model's deployment is a desired or aspirational set of outcomes for an organisation's online presence – in other words, a target to 'aim' for.

MEETING THE INTERNET MARKETING CHALLENGE

Marketing teams and the companies they serve often feel compelled to seek 'results' in the area of internet marketing, yet at the same time have difficulty specifying the outcomes they are looking for. It is not uncommon to hear that the primary objectives of web projects are 'satisfying internal stakeholders' or, the even vaguer, 'improve our web presence'. Unfortunately, while these objectives may well feel like they are achievable, they do not represent genuine (measurable) business advancements.

Projects that lack clear objectives often end up becoming just another design update. Design updates have easily demonstrable results – the new site always looks great – but often they have little impact on overall business improvement or visitor experience.

There are a number of ways to put in place measurable and achievable objectives – but randomly sourced goals (even numerical ones) still don't amount to strategy. For example, objectives can be defined in quantitative terms like 'increase leads generated from our website by 20 percent in the next

three months'. Alternatively, objectives can be geared towards specific technology advancements: for example, 'leverage SEO as a tactic to increase website visitors by 40 percent over the next six months'. In isolation, and without strategic underpinning, neither approach is recommended.

For those seeking greater structure in their thinking and approach, AIM9 can help. The AIM9 framework defines a set of nine dimensions – clusters of features or general characteristics that are inherent to the internet. Together, these dimensions encapsulate the qualities of the internet – those very qualities that intuitively we all want to leverage when embarking on an online initiative.

Armed with knowledge of these dimensions, a marketer can organise their thoughts by thinking about each dimension in turn. They can be used to define relative measures, structure benchmarks and quantify internet utilisation. It is possible to then consider the extent to which each dimension is relevant or applicable to a particular business category.

In summary, AIM9 provides the marketer with a structure to:

- ◆ develop marketing plans that comprehensively leverage the internet
- ◆ measure and evaluate current internet presence and activities, using as close to a quantitative approach as is available
- ◆ refocus the planning process on the bigger picture instead of the numerous technical details associated with internet-based activities of any kind
- ◆ enable marketers and business strategists to show leadership and regain control of the internet channel from the technologists
- ◆ seek out best practice and enable benchmarking to measure performance against the market and competitors
- ◆ structure the strategic selection of internet applications and tools (point solutions), and
- ◆ predict and analyse new and emerging internet phenomena.

When setting meaningful objectives, the AIM9 model is useful at all levels of business. The executive team has a framework for benchmarking or measuring competitors and the wider marketplace, and is thus able to lead the businesses. And the marketer is equipped with a tool to structure work into actionable chunks – facilitating the generation of ideas, the prioritisation and allocation of resources, and the measurement of outcomes.

NEW DIMENSIONS

The nine AIM9 dimensions are grouped into three key areas. These represent the focal points of any online activity – people and the connections between them. These broad areas are:

◆ **Management dimensions:** These correspond to the individuals 'behind' web property, and the level of direct or indirect manageability they have over the property. We use the terms managers and management to encompass companies and other entities simply because of the role of management that is being played by the individuals assigned to look after the web project.

◆ **Audience dimensions:** These correspond to the people who visit the web property, the consumers we are attracting and how we can define and connect with them. As this model is designed to assist managers, we continue to focus on areas that managers need to consider about their audience.

◆ **Interactivity dimensions:** These are the types of connection we can make between these people via the web property, and the ways in which the people interact online. Peer-to-peer and automated interaction as well as the more obvious connection being made between managers and audience are considered here.

Within these three areas are the dimensions. Some are fairly intuitive, even if they don't immediately spring to mind, such as 'reach', 'transactionality' and 'locatability'. Others such as 'participatory' and 'targeted' may seem less obvious. Some of the dimensions we have drawn together are not readily described using existing terminology or familiar language – we therefore apologise in advance for the one or two cringeworthy (yet useful) labels.

The dimensions of AIM9 are bound together by the internet's killer feature: free, fast and multi-way connectivity (shown at the centre of the diagram). Unlike the dimensions (on which an assessment is made along a continuum or scale), the internet's connectivity feature is binary. It's a presenting strength that is there to be utilised. The unique kind of connectivity provided by the internet is shown at the core of our model precisely because of its central role in facilitating the dimensions that radiate from it. Connectivity that is free, fast and multi-way brings the internet to life.

EXPLORING THE DIMENSIONS

Note that the AIM9 dimensions have not been formulated solely on the grounds that they are



Table 1: AIM9™ © Lcubed

unique to the internet. Many of them are shared with traditional communication or distribution mediums – for example, the telephone also has the speed and (for now, greater) reach than the internet. When compared to other channels, the internet scores higher on some dimensions and lower on others. Interestingly, when viewed within this framework the benefits of television and its future relevance in its current format are drawn into sharp perspective. (Consider how well broadcast TV compares to narrowcast interactive communications on the nine dimensions.)

Many of the dimensions can be interpreted on multiple levels. For example, consider the dimension of 'speed' and the various features and benefits this might encompass: new material can be posted to the web and be available instantly, reaction time to the new content is minimal, material can be changed rapidly in response to new information and feedback can be quickly gathered from visitor behaviour. It is clear to see that a cluster of features such as these have some important consequences. For instance, taken together these features highlight why trial and error testing (and A/B testing – where two parallel options are tested) are of heightened value and are therefore uniquely important in the online environment.

For the marketer with an eye on the future, the consequences of the interplay or overlapping of various dimensions are of particular interest. Within such combinations we often find revolutionary and paradigm-shifting outcomes. One example of this is the 'long tail effect', which is currently the subject of much popular discussion (see Chris Anderson's book, *The Long Tail*).



Table 2: AIM9™ - Primary Long Tail Dimensions

The concept of 'the long tail' is that businesses can use the internet to connect cheaply with highly targeted niche markets via a combination of hyperlinks and search engines (locatability) and global accessibility (reach). Once connected, they can deliver product or service (transactionality) very cost-effectively, thereby servicing previously inaccessible or unprofitable markets. As a direct result of being able to do business profitably with a huge volume of people (often with extremely quirky tastes), new and non-mainstream markets can emerge. Although they are not using our terminology, the proponents of the long tail are in effect arguing that the interplay of locatability, reach and transactionality have actually broken the stranglehold that popular hits (and therefore the 80/20 rule) have on today's culture.

Another outcome of 'locatability' and 'reach' is the 'flat earth' concept recently popularised in the book *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 20th Century* by Thomas Friedman. Core to this concept is the notion that location and company size are no longer barriers to doing business. This theory is exemplified by the migration of call centres and software development to the far flung reaches of our global village. Friedman's book also discusses the internet's role in enabling peer-to-peer interaction over large distances – this is the 'participatory' dimension in action.

Other dimensional combinations help us learn from, and describe, other outcomes that have yet to be fully realised and that will present marketers with enormous opportunities for competitive advantage. For example, 'reach', 'locatability' and 'measurability' combined give rise to a global database of customer intentions – where archives of users' search strings may be

mined to learn about customer wants and desires. Already, internet-savvy marketers are turning to so-called 'meta-crawlers' for market intelligence and previously undreamed of quantitative statistics.

Some marketers are also going a step further and using the internet to road-test ideas for market acceptance and interest before the product even exists. This can be achieved by building rudimentary websites and establishing very cost-effective search engine advertising to attract interested customers. Marketers can then just sit back and watch the log files, or even build a prospect database.

A STRUCTURED APPROACH

The AIM9 framework represents a practical launch pad for marketers to move away from platitudes about 'utilising the potential of the internet' or vague objectives like 'improving our web presence', toward concrete strategies (and, indeed, tactics) for achieving success online.

AIM9 amounts to preliminary thinking on the subject and we encourage constructive feedback that may lead to its refinement. In developing this framework our intention has been to create a practical, usable model that is easy to understand and will deliver value when deployed. We have sought to cluster where possible – that is, to arrive at the minimum number of dimensions that can still capture and distinguish between the internet's fundamental features.

Most significantly, with AIM9, practitioners can measure, compare or evaluate their existing online activities. With AIM9 it is possible to establish qualitative industry norms and then assess which dimensions are most relevant in particular applications or industries. As a consequence, marketers can develop a yardstick or indicator of best practice within a particular sector or consideration set. Competitors' online activities can then be subject to comparisons that are both measurable and actionable; and a combination of these activities can then drive the specification and selection of tools and applications in a meaningful and non-vendor directed way. For those desiring to contemplate the longer-term, the AIM9 framework also provides a means to think about future online trends and position the organisation to react to them.

Previously, marketers anxious to 'leverage the internet' knew that this meant integrating the internet's particular capabilities with those of more familiar channels. But the strengths of

the internet as a marketing tool remained ill-defined. With the framework introduced in this article, those marketers who wish to leverage the internet's special features have a reference guide and framework with which to do so. AIM9 does not replace the need for strategy that commits to decisions based on weighing benefits against costs, but at least provides the marketer with a place to start. **M**

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AIM9 check-list

AIM9 should be used to examine the performance of an organisation, its competitors or a whole sector against each of the dimensions. Questions that we encourage you to ask of your internet marketing include:

- ❖ **To what extent are you utilising the dimensions offered by the internet?**
- ❖ **To what extent are your competitors utilising the dimensions? (And how well do you compare to them?)**
- ❖ **Which dimensions do you think customers are demanding most? (Break this down by customer segment if you can.)**
- ❖ **How useful would it be to your customers if you provided or improved on each area?**
- ❖ **Are there new initiatives you can deploy that target improvement in each dimension?**
- ❖ **Is there a dimension that isn't being widely utilised by your competitors? Does this point to something you could you do to disrupt the market?**
- ❖ **Are there dimensions that are simply not appropriate to your business or sector, yet continue to receive funding and resources?**
- ❖ **Is there a company from a neighbouring sector with strong dimensional experience that could facilitate a move into your space?**
- ❖ **Can you use the combination of dimensions in the model to predict any emerging phenomena that could be relevant to your business?**