

by Charles Rubin

I already have written about Worldwide Web designers who disrespect potential customers by limiting access to their sites for the graphically challenged, or by assuming that the raw surfing experience is an acceptable substitute for information content. But the problem of "dissing" potential customers goes well beyond the Web.

I was recently asked if it was a disadvantage to market from an address on one of the big commercial online services. The person was worried about being automatically dismissed as a Clueless Newbie simply because they chose to participate in discussions or send mail from a commercial service rather than an ISP. This is a well-founded fear. I have actually seen messages in Usenet discussion groups in which the poster flatly states that he/she automatically ignores postings with "aol.com," "prodigy.com," or "compuserve.com" in the return address. Other discussion messages point to the rise of MLM schemes and other get-rich-quick offers on the Net, and lay the blame on sleaze artists or marketing ignoramuses who have migrated from online services.

Well, propellerheaded Net veterans may be unhappy that their cyber-clubs are being invaded by the great unwashed masses from online services, but rather than whining about it or trying to ignore the influx, I'd suggest they get used to it and learn to profit by it. Prodigy, CompuServe, and America Online represent an audience of well over 10 million potential customers. These people may be less net-savvy than those who go online via Netcom or PSI, but they generally have bigger wallets.

Rather than complaining about the stupid questions some people ask or the silly schemes others try to promote, why not make helpful suggestions and offer quality information? Exchanging useful information is the fundamental tenet of net culture anyway, so why should it apply to some but not others? And when you think about it, what's the downside of showing some courtesy and tolerance for the less "with-it" of the online world? Sure, maybe dissing the newbies will score you some points with your Net-veteran pals, but which group of people likely represents a larger (or faster-growing) market for your business?

Understanding is a two-way street, of course. If you're venturing out onto the Net from an online service, it behooves you to spend some time lurking, reading FAQ files, and learning the cultural ins and outs of cyberspace before using it as a broadcast channel for advertising. Members of online services are generally less critical about commercial notices and unsolicited e-mail than are populations in Usenet discussion groups or even e-mail discussion lists. You can't assume that what works (or what's tolerated) on online services will get the same reception elsewhere on the Net. Have some respect for the differences between communities of users, take the time to learn what those differences are, and adjust your marketing strategy accordingly.

The population of the Net is changing, and there's nothing anyone can do about that. You can either adapt to the changes and enhance your online reputation, or complain about them and suffer the negative consequences. For online guerrillas, there's only one choice.