

For Gary Davis having a website was a given almost a decade ago. Of course, even back then he admits he was late to the game and didn't play it quickly enough. And those missteps cost his agency money.

"In 1997, we did not have a website and we were doing \$5-7 million in leisure airline ticketing. That's when the Internet players started coming of age. It took our company six months to respond, to build a website," he readily admits. "The following year, we did \$500,000 in leisure airline ticketing. We didn't have the place for our clients to come and be able to do the same thing they were able to do elsewhere."

Today, Davis reports that close to 50 percent of his business, some \$20 million in leisure sales originates from electronic communications, web site or e-mails that have a call to action. Customers may also book online or e-mail or call from the information provided on the site. Today, he is even dabbling in life chat.

The main moral behind that story, according to Davis, is the myth of doing business on the Internet. "I think the mistake a lot of agencies make is Field of Dreams, if I build it they will come. Agencies have a tendency to build a website and think they will do business all over the universe. In reality, your website is there first and foremost to serve your existing clients."

Rather than gaining new business, his website was a means for turning around a shrinking share of his existing customers' business first. "You should get into the Internet side of the business to further growth from your existing client base as well as add new clients. It doesn't happen overnight. You have to work it, grow it," he cautions his colleagues.

And content is what powers this website and makes it work for his customers.. "We have done a lot of changing of our website since we started, but not a lot of changing of how we use Passport Online. That is our content solution."

Gary Davis was an early adopter of the Passport Online technology. Having been a client for more than seven years, he just wants more and more suppliers to bring their content on to the Passport Online system so he can sell it.

"Being in the travel business, as we developed a web presence, we found ourselves in the web design business. What a website needs most is content. That's where Passport saves me. The hardest part on a website for an agency is having to hand type in faxes. We even built a magic box and converted HTML files. But, bottom line, we could never get everything right."

For Davis and his customers, Passport provides consistent content. And, someone else is changing it, updating it. Not his agents or his staff, who already have full time jobs. And Davis is able to prioritize his offers. He is a big believer in selected, preferreds, highly preferreds, working his VCOM relationships. And, he also uses the Passport content to fill in gaps in product as well.

“Where we might be weak on a supplier, I will pull up one that is in the Passport system and include that offer.”

And the offers built with the Passport content are designed to market to his existing clients.

“We send out emails and the email specials will push clients back to our website where they can book. Or they will fill out an email trip request.” Davis estimates his agency generates at least 20 trip requests a day through the Passport Online system. And those are live, convertible customers.

Now, Davis has elevated his plan. It is all about capturing customer data and building a strong, target-driven email database to keep sending out these customized offers.

His website allows consumers to go in and register and sign up. He asks for email address and physical address. He asks the customers if they want to receive a monthly magazine, can they complete a quick survey? All the data is then immediately stored in his Client Base Plus. His website is directly linked in to his ClientBase Plus. So, all of his promotions are now targeted to the profile requests the customers filled out.

And now, he’s training his customers to manage and update their profiles.

“If you just took a southern Caribbean cruise with us, we encourage you, when you come back, to uncheck that desire and now check something else, like Alaska or whatever your next wish might be. Then, we will send you only what you want.”

Davis plans to continue to mine his targets, and really make sure he is sending his customers offers that will make them respond.

And he cautions his fellow agent colleagues to be sure to be in this game, at whatever size your agency is.

“The Internet is here to stay. If you are not going to communicate with your customers via electronic means, I hate to say, it but you are pretty well done.”

His only direct mail tends to be part of the Vacation.com Engagement Program. He no longer does Yellow Page advertising and very little newspaper advertising, because the margins are too slim.

“We would produce 1,000 leads in the yellow pages and two bookings. They just shop you to death. That message is too stagnant. You get one ad for the whole year, so you have to try and put in something that applies to everyone.

The nice thing about email marketing is that I have significantly increased my close rate. With the yellow pages I had a 2% close rate, but with email, it is close to a 70% close rate

for every inquiry that comes in.” Davis has his home-based agents using the Passport Online email tools. For those agents, he is giving them their own Agentport where they can build emails with their custom banner, phone number, logo and specials. He has 40 of those sites in place for his home-based agents. He sees those tools as the best way for those individual entrepreneurs to keep and build their business.

The bottom line, according to Davis, is agents need to get the right tools and then let those tools really work for their business.

“Agents develop a website and then let it sit there. They say, ‘Wow, nobody came, and they shut it down.’ They missed their opportunity.

“The more the online agencies grow, they are adopting physical agency characteristics and support people. They are starting to creep into our part of the business, but we as an industry, we are not creeping into their part of the business. We need to be where our customers want us.”

And for Davis, providing a way to communicate, search and book if they want is keeping his customers with him.

“Our customers want to go their favorite agency’s website to book. And they know, my buddy in KC is going to take care of me and cover my back.”