42™
Rules
for a
Web Presence
That Wins

2ND EDITION

Essential Business Strategy for
Website and Social Media Success

PHILIPPA GAMSE, CMC

FOREWORD BY JIM BLASINGAME

SECOND EDITION

"42 Rules for a Web Presence That Wins (2nd Edition)" Book Excerpt

Essential Business Strategy for Website and Social Media Success

By Philippa Gamse, CMC
Foreword by Jim Blasingame

Super star *press*

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C o n t e n t s

Foreword by Jim Blasingame

The fact that you're reading these words is cause for congratulations. You're turning the pages of *42 Rules for a Web Presence That Wins*, a book that's devoted to the one thing that is arguably the most vexing challenge for 21st century business owners: creating and maintaining a successful Internet strategy.

So, congratulations. This means you're already way ahead of at least half of your competitors.

Allow me to reveal what I believe are the three predominant markers of a successful Internet strategy:

1. There is a seamless connection between the organization's online elements and the traditional business strategy.
2. It is a contributing lever for the organization's entire business model, not just an obligatory practice.
3. It is a profit center, not just an expense line-item.

Before you get too excited with the compliment I just gave you, the fact that this book is in your hands also indicates that you're probably one of those vexed business owners. In that case, you've got a lot of work ahead of you. But here are two pieces of good news:

1. While creating a successful Internet strategy is indeed vexing, it's not impossible.
2. You're holding the book authored by one of the people on the planet who can actually help you become unvexed.

Philippa Gamse and I have been friends since the dawn of the 21st century, when she first joined me on my weekday radio program, The Small Business Advocate® Show. From the

beginning, it was clear to me that Philippa's deep tap root of experience gave her a window into the future of the then-fledgling online universe. During her many subsequent appearances on my show, my audience and I have been the grateful beneficiaries of her guidance, and even some tough love.

With regard to that "tap root" I mentioned, at least three years before you could post or view a commercial HTML website, Philippa was contributing to online standards and best practices that have become part of the foundation of your current online experience. She and her colleague, Terry Grunwald, were establishing online networking perspectives that became the headwaters for contemporary social media behavior with their seminal work, *Seven Steps to Building Electronic Communities* (1993). I've been telling my audience about the power of community for years; Philippa has been doing it for decades.

If you know anything about my work, you'll know that I've called the end of the 10,000 year-old Age of the Seller, and identified the advent of the Age of the Customer™. In this new age, the Customer is in control, and this new-found power comes from access to the information that formerly was controlled—and meted out—by Sellers.

Thanks to the Internet and associated elements and resources, Customers have new expectations that preclude those traditional business models that are not supported by a complementary online strategy. Your existing Customers are online deciding who to do business with before you know they're interested, and prospects are doing the same thing before you even know they exist. At this moment, merely being competitive isn't enough—you will also have to be relevant.

In fact, here's another prediction: within five years, businesses that are relevant in the Age of the Customer won't have separate traditional and online strategies. They will just go to market with a single strategy that seamlessly cross-collateralizes classic traditional best practices and digital tools and resources. If this is

what you want, as I said earlier, you're way ahead of the game because you are in possession of Philippa's book.

So, congratulations again for picking up *42 Rules for a Web Presence That Wins*. When you're looking for someone to help you forge a road ahead, be sure to find someone who knows the way. If you seek that 21st century marketing strategy that you're going to need to forge your way successfully in the Age of the Customer, you've found your guide—Philippa Gamse.

Let her help you.

Jim Blasingame
Host of the Small Business Advocate® Show
Author of the upcoming book, *The Age of the Customer*™

Back in 1993, I co-authored a paper called "Seven Steps to Building Electronic Communities"[1] with Terry Grunwald, who was then Executive Director of NCexChange. Terry and I had been introduced via email due to our mutual interest in the fast-growing world of digital communications. We both worked for nonprofit organizations that were exploring the potential of these new technologies to facilitate their operations. I was in Chicago, and she was in Raleigh, North Carolina.

For a number of months, we communicated entirely by email. I well remember the day that I had something to tell her, and I suddenly knew that this time I needed to actually hear her voice, so I picked up the phone. It was a surreal moment. We became friends and have stayed in touch ever since.

Our paper was widely adopted in the nonprofit world, and was made part of the prestigious *Benton Foundation Online Toolkit*. It was added to the reading lists of a number of universities, translated into several languages, and was cited in papers written for the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program. Terry and I presented on our findings at national conferences in Cupertino and Boston, and ultimately at an international conference in Maastricht, Belgium.

Fast forward to November 2009, when I was creating website content for my new business identity Websites That Win International. Knowing that people still searched for the "Seven Steps" paper, I decided to include it in my articles selection. And so I read it again for the first time in a number of years.

I was fascinated to discover that, aside from terms like "Usenet newsgroups" or "bulletin boards," most of the guiding principles that we

had described are still equally valid today. In fact, I think that we can justifiably claim to have written an early primer on social media.

The tools have changed since 1993, but many of the underlying principles haven't. When Terry and I talked about the "Seven Steps," we constantly stressed that most of our content wasn't about technology at all. It was about the goals and objectives that the organization wanted to achieve, and how these were impacted by the power and new opportunities that the Internet offered.

That's the spirit in which I wrote this book. Since I started my consulting practice in 1995, my clients have been mostly small and medium-sized businesses, entrepreneurs, associations, and nonprofits. Usually they are not purely e-commerce businesses, and can rarely afford the luxury of a dedicated in-house web team (often the web presence is looked after by folks who also have several other roles!).

I've made very conscious choices to differentiate myself as a business strategy consultant. While many web designers are excellent at creating visually appealing and technically functional websites and social media pages, few of them are able or choose to provide overall strategic direction, or to evaluate the return on investment of an organization's web presence. My practice has been focused on bridging that gap.

In all my years of experience, I've seen three consistent issues:

- Many businesses, both large and small, are still failing to create an effective web governance structure, to design holistic web strategies, or to intelligently evaluate the results of their digital marketing efforts.
- 95% of web presences that I've audited were leaving money on the table, sometimes a lot of it, and usually the owner or senior executives either had no idea, or were unwilling to take action to address the issues.
- Most websites fail to make the emotional connections with visitors which are crucial to creating and sustaining meaningful—and profitable—online relationships.

This book is about business concepts, issues, and strategies for the web, including some which address and help to resolve the above problems. My hope is to provide a fast but thought-provoking read to help you to think through some of the key issues, to make your own decisions and to set your own priorities.

When I was invited to write this book in the *42 Rules* series, I called Mitchell Levy, the Publisher, to discuss my vision for the project. I asked if he was confident that there would be a market for the information that I had to offer.

Mitchell replied very simply: "Do your clients and prospects still ask these types of questions?" I responded, "Yes, all the time." He said, "Well then, that tells you what you need to know."

Enjoy the book!

2 Appoint Your Web Ambassador

Every business making a serious investment in its web presence should appoint a "Web Ambassador."

Like it or not, your web presence plays a key role in your organization. Your customers and prospects, Board members, employees (current and future), volunteers, bankers, insurers, investors, vendors and sponsors all look to your website and your social media presence for information, resources, and community. If they don't find these things quickly, there are many other online venues for them to defect to.

Web technology offers operational efficiencies for your business which go far beyond marketing your traditional products and services. These can include customer support on a 24/7 basis, human resource applications, sharing of internal documents and other materials with appropriate personnel and clients, project management, and sales of revenue-generating e-books and white papers.

This range of possibilities presents new and unique challenges in budget and management terms. Instead of fitting conveniently into a "box" within one department of your organization, the web impacts your entire business. With good planning and implementation, your web presence should be both a revenue-generating and a cost-savings centre that positions you at the cutting edge of your industry. Without this, you could be missing out on major opportunities, and look bad to boot!

So where does your web presence "live" in your organization, and who should be in charge of it? What skill set is required? I've always joked that if your site resides in the Information Technology department, it runs the risk of having marvelous

functionality but no message, and if it's placed in Marketing, it might contain stunning copy, but not work as well!

I strongly believe that every business making a serious investment in its web presence should appoint a "Web Ambassador." This person should be part of the management team. He or she should have a complete understanding of your ongoing business strategy, marketing and customer service plans, operations, etc. in order to always be able to advise on how the web can support, enhance, and grow those objectives. This is the person who will be responsible for the high-level, 30,000ft perspective, as well as overall supervision of those who drill down into all aspects of your web activities.

Although I don't believe that this role requires direct programming skills, your Web Ambassador should have enough technical knowledge to stay abreast of developments in technology from a business perspective and to evaluate potential enhancements to your web presence as recommended by your designer or others.

This person should also be able to analyze the traffic information for your web presence, or to appoint someone who can do this (whether internal or external). It's important that he or she can formulate critical questions about your online performance based on in-depth knowledge of your strategies and desired outcomes, so that you can evaluate your return on investment at a sophisticated level, and make appropriate changes to your content, social media, and marketing tactics.

Your Web Ambassador should have regular contact with all of your various business areas, be open and available to listen to colleagues and customer feedback, and take into consideration their requests and suggestions for future enhancements.

I also recommend that you put your website and social media presence on your management meeting agenda at least every quarter. At this time, the Web Ambassador can report on progress and suggested improvements—with possible costs, projected benefits, and appropriate priorities for each one.

Ideally, the Web Ambassador should report directly to your Chief Executive Officer. This position should have sufficient authority within the organization to be a respected voice at the table, and to be heard during budget and spending policy discussions. It's vital to ensure that the web presence is adequately represented in these, since it's key to so many areas of your business.

Perhaps the Web Ambassador becomes an entirely new position for you, or perhaps you already have the ideal person. Either way, I hope that I've convinced you that the strategic importance of your website and social media presence demands that this is a much needed senior role.

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Consider the Competition

Deciding how much of your intellectual property to make public is a delicate balancing act.

German automaker Porsche recently banned its employees from using sites such as eBay, Facebook, and Google Mail during office hours. Porsche's concern was not around the use of employee time, or the posting of inappropriate content, but rather caused by fear of industrial espionage.

According to the business magazine *Wirtschaftswoche*, foreign intelligence agencies systematically used Facebook to contact company insiders and win their trust in order to obtain information.[14]

Many companies, large and small, are faced with the ongoing decision of how much material to make publicly available within their website and social media presence. In each case, you're weighing the benefit of providing content that boosts your credibility, emotional appeal, and the visitor's propensity to buy, against the threat of making it easier for your competition to steal your work or to poach your customers or employees.

The debate usually centers around one or more of the following types of information:

- Detailed product specifications, training materials, and user manuals
- Articles, white papers, research findings, and other intellectual property
- Customer, client, or member listings
- Names and roles of key personnel

I've raised this issue many times in my presentations to CEO groups around the country, and asked participants about the conclusions that they've reached. The responses that I receive range widely in their perspective.

Often, business owners take the type of stance adopted by Dave Hatter, President of Internet consulting firm Libertas Technologies in Cincinnati, Ohio, who says, "If my competition can steal my customers that easily, then we aren't doing a very good job. And we feel that it's important for our clients and potential clients to see the quality of our work."

On the other side of the equation, I've heard horror stories about intense campaigns to lure away valuable employees. Companies worry that displaying a client list gives the competition a guide to the marketplace for the types of services that they provide. In one instance, the customer of one of my participants gave the password for a secure support site to a competitor, allowing him access to a number of confidential in-house manuals and product specifications.

Of course, it's also important for you to monitor what your competition is up to online. You probably already have a list of the key players in your industry or locale, and their websites and social media pages. You should check to see how they're using the web in comparison to you on a regular basis.

Is their focus the same as yours, or are there some differences that might be significant? Have they made any major new developments recently? Have they added new designs, content, or functionality to their online image?

Jason Partee, owner of industrial oven distributor Vander Industries in Torrance, California, says, "I need to know what kind of pricing my competition offers, as well as what they're stocking, so that I can be competitive. I started my new company with the express idea of selling certain products for lower than anyone else."

From my own perspective, other speakers and consultants have stolen my articles and passed them off as their original content, so I have first-hand experience of this debate. My personal opinion remains that if the competition really wants to find out what you're doing, they probably will, and that it's more damaging to business growth not to show content that demonstrates your expertise and track record.

But I also recognize that this can be a very sensitive and personal issue, and it's one area where I advise my clients that they really need to reach their own decisions.

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Site Search is Serious Business

Your internal search engine reports can be a goldmine for market research and site usability information.

An internal site search engine is a key component of any website with many pages/products or complex content. If it's available, visitors will often use the site search immediately without any reference to the navigation template or other links. So it's vital to provide what they're looking for quickly and easily (see Rule 33).

Your site search engine can also be an extremely valuable tool for you. Tracking the keywords and phrases that visitors are looking for can tell you a lot about their expectations of you and the terminology that they use to describe their needs.

For example, you can evaluate which of your offerings are most sought after, and consider featuring them more prominently. You can see common misspellings of words, or if visitors use different search terms than you expected, which can provide suggestions for tweaking and enhancing your copy.

StoneL, a part of Metso Automation USA, Inc. is a leading supplier of process networking and valve communication technology, based in Fergus Falls, Minnesota.

As part of planning for a major website redesign, the team took a close look at their internal site search statistics and discovered some interesting things:

- Less than 10 percent of visitors overall used the site search
- Visitors often entered misspellings, such as "neumatic" for "pneumatic"

- Most visitors looked for specific model numbers (they often had outdated information for obsolete components, so there were a high number of "No results found" responses)
- Many visitors searched for very generic terms, such as "limit switch," which returned over 50 documents

This information suggested that many potential customers might be frustrated and leaving the site prematurely. Accordingly, we specified a number of improvements.

Given that StoneL manufactures many different components, the number of visitors conducting searches seemed very low, suggesting that they were not seeing the search box, which should be more clearly displayed within the redesigned page template.

A sophisticated site search utility should allow the input of synonyms and misspellings so that it can suggest corrections and alternatives. These can include differences in spelling due to language, such as U.S./U.K. English, as well as actual mistakes. The data in the StoneL site search reports provide a good starting point for this list.

Tammy Lueders, Marketing & Sales Coordinator, was very pleased to see the evidence contained in the reports. She says:

> The numbers of queries that gave "No results" prove something that I had been suspecting—that people do search by complete model numbers, and they often have an old number. They probably get very frustrated, since they don't know how else to look, or perhaps they think they're at the wrong website.

> We do have the ability to export all possible model numbers for a given search from our database. Now that we know that people have old information, we know that it's important to develop a crossover reference from the previous number to the replacement, so that we can give them the updates that they need.

> We'll also explore providing additional criteria to narrow down results when a vague search term like "switch" is used. We could ask questions about what type of switch they're looking for, or we could ask what they want to do with it, and then provide results based on their response.

In my experience, very few smaller businesses are monitoring their site search usage in this way, even if they do have a search engine installed. This information can be eye-opening market research for you, and it can be very helpful in improving your visitor experience and conversion rates. If you have site search, don't waste it—track the results!

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Talk to the Buyer behind the Buyer

Think about the hidden influencers behind purchasing decisions.

In addition to the clearly defined target audiences for your web presence, there may be other less obvious visitor types who are important or influential in the buying process, and whom you also need to address with your online messaging.

This is especially true in technical fields or those where your promotional copy naturally includes a lot of industry-specific terminology. It's important to ask whether everyone who sees this material will understand it, and if not, whether that matters.

The Component Vendors Consortium was an organization (since disbanded) of companies who made software components.

Their websites were full of technical jargon—terms like "C#-SQLite" and "contravariant generic types." In fact, I joked with them that, contrary to all my training at Deloitte which stressed the need to "understand your client's business," most of their marketing copy still had me completely baffled!

I asked the members whether they were sure that every visitor to their website would understand their terminology. At first, they said "Yes," very confidently. After all, the people who used their products were programmers and information technology professionals.

But then they reconsidered and realized that a completely different visitor may be involved in the process—one who is crucial to the purchasing decision, but who isn't technical at all.

After the target customer makes the component selection, he probably goes to his Chief Financial Officer or someone in the Purchasing Department who actually creates the order and processes the payment. It's quite likely that this person will go to the vendor website to ensure that they're dealing with a bona fide company.

This visitor type has no interest in technical specifications or case studies, but almost certainly will look at the "About Us" page, and possibly the customer listings or testimonials. So it's important that these areas are written in language that a lay person can easily understand.

There are potentially hidden influencers for all sorts of purchasing decisions. KiddieCorp, Inc., based in San Diego, California, provides children's programs at conventions and events throughout the United States and Canada.

The KiddieCorp website contains several pictures of a very cute egg-headed kid affectionately known as "Jack." The picture captions say things like: "My parents follow me to all their events!"

The site presents plenty of information for parents and meeting planners about important things like security, insurance, and staff training. But there's nothing that's truly aimed at children.

I've often thought about parents encountering resistance, and that it might help to link Jack's pictures to pages designed specifically for kids. These could show how much fun the programs are, some of the cool activities to look forward to, and give a sense of the energy involved from the child's perspective.

In fact, I recently suggested that Jack should have his own Facebook page. KiddieCorp President Chris Tempesta loves the idea. She says, "Jack's Facebook page would probably be more popular than our website!"

A few years ago, I audited the website of a long term care and assisted living facility. The owners were surprised to hear that the most visited pages on their site were the weekly menus. But I wasn't surprised—one of the primary audiences for this type of web presence are caregivers of the residents, either current or prospective, who want to see (among other things) what their loved ones are eating.

In each of these cases, there are people involved who may not be the main decision makers, but who certainly can influence the buying process. Their needs and criteria for choosing a supplier may differ from those of your primary contact. You may or may not get to speak with them in person to make your case from their perspective and to create emotional connections with them. So it's crucial that you do so through your web presence.

37 Numbers and Testing Trump Politics

Objective testing and reporting can help to defuse politics and argue the case against subjective decisions.

I've encountered many situations where decisions have been made and policies created by people who seem to be operating from a distance, or who clearly have allowed personal feelings to sway their thinking.

Often, the better course of action can be obvious to lower-grade employees or outside consultants who may be ignored, discouraged, or even intimidated from offering their suggestions.

In this scenario, clear results from user testing and reviewing web traffic information can be very helpful in allowing the objective presentation of facts in support of recommendations.

Several years ago, I reviewed the website of a large professional association. The site opened with a splash page (that is, a page whose only function was to present a link that said "Click here to enter"). This page was frankly hideous. However, it had been designed by the nephew of the Director of Marketing, and the doting uncle refused all requests to order it removed.

My audit of the traffic reports showed conclusively that 30 percent of visitors left the site immediately upon seeing the splash page. Clearly this was a significant number (and interestingly, one that I found pretty consistently to be the bounce rate from splash pages). The Director of Marketing couldn't continue to advocate for something that was driving away that much potential business.

Veteran analytics expert Avinash Kaushik coined a great term for the gridlock or poor decision making that can occur in this way. He calls it the "HiPPO"—the Highest Paid Person's Opinion.

Steve Jackson, Chief Analytics Officer for Kwantic in Helsinki, Finland, told me a great "HiPPO" story:

> The HiPPO in question wanted to run a €2 million banner advertising campaign for a mobile PDA on thirty high profile media sites. However, using previous campaign data about cost per click and subsequent conversion rates, I calculated that it would cost around €16,000 to sell one item. Given that the price of the product was €350, I flagged this as a major waste of money—it would actually be cheaper to give away 1,000 PDAs and generate some great buzz with consumers.
>
> Despite my warnings, the HiPPO decided to run the campaigns anyway. But when after a week they only had 13 sales, it became obvious that I was right, and they stopped the ads. They still spent about €200,000 but that's a lot less than €2 million.

Steve added, "The major plus was that the HiPPO started paying a lot more attention to the data after that!"

Sometimes, the culprit in poor decisions is not an individual, but corporate policy. I've seen a number of examples where a parent company makes rules for subsidiaries located in another country, and often with a different culture.

A recent audience member who works for "a unit of a leading global manufacturer" responded to a survey question about the most successful aspect of their web presence. He said sadly, "N/A. Website managed and maintained at Corporate." Then, he described their greatest challenge in this area as, "Timely forwarding of website information requests by Corporate."

Indeed, when I checked their website, no contact details were provided at all—there was only an online form. Submission of this produced the highly impersonal message: "Thank you for contacting us. We will forward your question/request to the appropriate person, and respond to you as soon as we can." This certainly doesn't give the impression that much value is placed on the visitor's needs.

Surely it would be worth investigating how many of these forms are completed, and how long it takes to forward them appropriately. It also might be eye-opening to the corporate executives to have some idea of the potential business lost through this convoluted procedure.

Of course, I'm being very tongue in cheek here—business owners can make excellent decisions in short timeframes. The key to well-informed decision making lies in the use of objective facts, intelligence, and hands-on experience, rather than subjective desires.

C | End Notes

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About the Author

Photo by Dov Friedmann

A Web strategy pioneer, Philippa Gamse has been working with Internet applications since 1991. Originally from the UK, she formed her US-based consulting and speaking practice in 1995. Clients report significant improvement in quality Web traffic, visitor engagement, customer loyalty and qualified sales leads within 30 days of implementing her recommendations. Philippa is a member of the Adjunct Faculty of Hult International Business School where she teaches digital and social media marketing. She was the sole featured expert for the cover story on effective Web strategies for UPS "Compass" Magazine Fall 2009, distributed to more than 1 million businesses. She is a Certified Management Consultant—an ISO-accredited designation recognized in over 60 countries.

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"The rules may be less important than the examples! Some of the anecdotes are counter-intuitive and web 'ambassadors' will benefit simply by asking the questions implied by Gamse's rules."
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Jim Sterne, Founder, eMetrics Marketing Optimization Summit and Author, "Social Media Metrics"

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