

Effective CPA firm Web sites: Success can be a click away

By **Liz Gold**

(May 21, 2007) - Stephen White, director of sales and marketing for CPA and business advisory firm Aronson & Co. in Rockville, Md., has a rule for his department when it comes to their Web site strategy: If a visitor can not find the information they are searching for in three clicks or less, it's time to revamp the design.

It's no secret that a Web site is instrumental in any solid marketing plan, but how Advertisement accounting firms use these tools runs the gamut from a static page with basic information, to a more sophisticated approach incorporating multimedia techniques such as blogs, podcasts and webinars.

Nielsen/NetRatings, an Internet media and market research firm, found that over the month of March, a typical individual visited a total of 107 Web addresses - an 8 percent increase from February. Statistics also show that a visitor views a Web page for an average of 52 seconds before clicking onto something else.

The key to having a successful Web site, experts say, is to differentiate yourself from the sea of others disseminating similar information. Many CPA firms are offering the same types of services and expertise, so using tools such as real photographs of staff members, engaging graphics and clever narratives to describe their organization can ultimately make a significant impact on what a client takes away from their experience on a firm's site.

That impact can often lead to new clients.

"I think one of the issues of [CPA firm] Web sites is that they all have the same thing and they don't spend the time to really think about who they are targeting," said Kristi Stangeland, a CPA and author of *Effective Web Sites for CPAs*. "It's really using the information on the Web site to make sure the people you want to contact you are, and the people you might not want to contact you don't."

Still, more firms are beefing up their e-marketing strategies, and many are beginning with their Web sites, knowing that it is often the first place prospective clients and employees go to learn more about them. Below is a roundup of some firms with unique or striking Web sites.

THE BONADIO GROUP

The Bonadio Group, headquartered in Pittsford, N.Y., (www.bonadio.com) restructured its Web site a year ago to serve two purposes, according to Alan Vitberg, the firm's director of marketing. The first was to give prospects an affirmation of the firm after their initial visit, and the second was to use it as a recruiting tool.

"When we did some market research to talk to both college students and experienced hires about how they were finding their information about The Bonadio Group, everybody said, 'We're looking at your Web site,'" Vitberg recalled. "That's when we said we have to do the best job we can."

After spending a considerable amount of time redesigning the site, which offers a partners' page with a checkerboard of headshots and individual bios of staff members, as well as personal quotes and snippets, Vitberg said that on average he spends 10 hours a month maintaining the site.

"Our Web site is just one of the pieces of a pretty comprehensive e-marketing infrastructure, and it's designed to work with all the other pieces to maximize our reach," he said.

Most recently, the firm introduced "Viewpoints," a podcast element to the Web site that has five-to-10-minute recordings by the staff focusing on a variety of client topics. This new feature, which Vitberg said would be updated once a month, was launched on a Friday, and by Tuesday, the firm counted that the program had been downloaded roughly 150 times.

Vitberg said that next up for the portal is to focus on the career section, which he hopes to have completed by college recruiting season in the late summer.

ARMANINO MCKENNA

San Ramon, Calif.-based Armanino McKenna (www.amllp.com) also did something unique to introduce its firm's staff members: Each was posed a different way with the firm's logo - a blue pyramid. In what the firm has labeled "Boardroom Bios," viewers can read a question-and-answer section about each employee and get a taste of the personalities behind the firm.

"As it turns out, the partner bios are the most popular page of the entire Web site," said Lori Colvin, Armanino McKenna's marketing director, adding that her team works on the firm's site approximately eight hours month.

She revealed that the second-most-visited area on the site is the careers section. The firm's career page offers potential recruits a six-minute video complete with staff interviews and upbeat music, while weaving in an abstract story of a younger job-seeker's process. The video, which was launched in September, attracted 3,000 hits in a three-month period, according to Colvin.

Working with an outside marketing firm helped Armanino McKenna focus on what they wanted to portray, and to sharpen their Web image. Prior to June 2006, they had maintained their Web site internally, and had not concentrated on branding their name.

"You needed the look and feel to be powerful," Colvin said of her site's redesign. "Really, the information was almost secondary to how people check out Web sites and what they are going to use it for."

In the future, Colvin said that Armanino McKenna, which is described on the site as "a cooler water cooler," would be adding a community involvement section that will highlight a firm program that gives money to its employees for the charity of their choice.

BROWN SMITH WALLACE

At St. Louis-based Brown Smith Wallace (www.bswllc.com), upwards of 40 hours a month are spent working on the Web site, according to Danielle Oser, the firm's manager of Web initiatives. Along with a rebranding, the firm redesigned its site a year ago, and worked with different departments within the organization to determine how best to organize its content in accordance with clients' needs.

"It's not about us, it's about how our potential clients are going to need something," Oser said. "We wanted to bring it more people-focused. All the photography is photos of our own people. We tried to really break down what we do into manageable content chunks."

Using large revolving photos of staff on its home page and a colorful graphic that changes when gliding along the firm's services, Brown Smith Wallace's Web site offers a section on upcoming events, the latest news and a search bar without cluttering its home page.

The firm also has four sister sites that spring from its consulting group that link off of its main site. One of those Web sites, www.virtualtechfair.com, allows viewers to attend virtual trade shows, while two others, www.software4distributors.com and www.software4manufacturers.com, allow software buyers to compare prices. The fourth site, www.bpp401k.com, includes a 401(k) plan sponsor's fiduciary toolkit.

STONEFIELD JOSEPHSON

Many people who have visited the Web site of Los Angeles-based Stonefield Josephson (www.sjaccounting.com) talk about the "Back Porch" section, which allows viewers a peek into the lives of the firm's employees. Complete with a photo slideshow and captions, the section profiles a handful of employees at a time away from the office. Lyne Noella, director of corporate strategy and chief marketing officer for SJ, said that she brought the idea with her from her native Minnesota four years ago, where on the back porch, "You look over the lake and you talk about life."

"Our philosophy is [that] the Web site is the starting point for much of our communications," she said. "When it's time to either introduce a new business unit or write a news release or report some marketing promotion that promotes our corporate strategy, we'll begin at the Web site. Print materials are second generation."

Using an emerald green strip down the left side of the screen for its navigation bar, the Web site offers a section on careers complete with an article written by the firm's director of human resources. Also on the site is a page that lists all staff members, with links bringing the viewer to a separate page for each person and a slideshow welcome note from the firm's president.

Noella said that the firm is going to focus on building out the careers section of the Web site, which will include "creative features giving insight into personnel at all levels," and that it will continue to add more to its Back Porch section.

"I think it's a wonderful opportunity to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace," Noella said of Web site use. "It's a wonderful opportunity to enjoy marketing, to have fun with it. You're going to get a lot of mileage with whatever effort you put into the Web site because it's so accessible."

VITALE, CATURANO & CO.

Bringing more of the firm's expertise to the forefront is a goal for those working on the site at Boston-based Vitale, Caturano & Co. (www.vitale.com).

A redesign is in the works, with a new look, feel and navigation flow. The firm is using an outside company to help in the process, according to Nick Vasi, the firm's graphic designer.

Aside from a clean, white background, with photographs of staff members, the site's home page has a section for charity and, surprisingly, a link to the firm's art gallery.

"Our firm's culture is something we're very proud of and we want to get [that] across," said Vasi, who spends upwards of 15 hours a month maintaining the site. "We are very involved in the community. We have a foundation within the firm. The best feature is the differentiation between a standard accounting firm and the breadth of experiences we offer."

Identifying the Web site as a "primary area" for promoting the firm, Vasi said that a fair amount of people come to Vitale Caturano directly through an information form, and that, as a result, his organization has gained new clients.

Vasi said that aside from the new redesign packing more content, Vitale Caturano wants to focus on the service that it provides to its clients. "When we go to a Web site and see a very static 'Here's our list of services,' we really tried to move beyond that," Vasi explained. "Let's not talk about Vitale; let's talk about what we can do for our client."

ARONSON & CO.

A rectangle of text organized by orange, gray, white and black brings a lot of information to view without being overwhelming on the Aronson & Co. site (www.aronsoncompany.com). Included on its homepage are links to webinars, the industries served and the firm's charitable foundation, while its officer profiles include a bio, a photo and a contact link.

The firm hosts a full-time, onsite webmaster to make technical changes and upgrades, as well as a graphic design department. Both sections report to sales and marketing director White. "The site's best feature is the manner in which it's designed in terms of a matrix model," he said. "In the accounting model, we look at the core verticals that we service. I think if you were to navigate our site, we have a strong audit and tax department, we sort of 'matrixize' the service in each of those vertical buckets."

White also points out that the Web site is integrated into the firm's customer relationship management system. Every visitor that comes into the site gets flagged to White and is crosschecked to see if they are already a contact. At that point, White said, he can contact the person or distribute the appropriate information within 24 hours. Through his system, he is able to maintain a "360-degree view" of the lead contact or client inquiry. Half the traffic coming into the site on a monthly basis is new visitors, according to White, generating, on average, 15 to 25 leads. Of that number, two to five ultimately become clients.

"What we're seeing, more often than not, is people making purchasing decisions or their interest in your firm is growing as a direct result of a Web search," he said.

Though the firm has been producing webinars for a while, White said that he would like the site to

host YouTube-type videos, and build on the blogging technique.

CONCLUDING ADVICE

For firms looking to enhance their site, Stangeland suggested avoiding waste such as fancy flash introductions, and warned against creating a site out of obligation, only to neglect it.

"When people see very old material, links that no longer work, that's definitely not a good thing," she said, adding that firms should avoid having copy run across the page, since people read differently online. "A good site would have information that would keep me there, reading about what they are doing, their expertise, and compel me to sign up for their newsletter."

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