Using Customer-Focused Marketing to Create Unique Websites

Now that we've entered the 21st century, the gimmicks that worked at the dawn of the web age are being replaced by web techniques of more substance with a solid strategic vision behind them. Whether the site is brochureware or totally interactive, it should speak to the audience (stakeholders) for whom it is intended. Unfortunately, because the owners of the sites want to see their vision on the site (which is rarely expressed in the same manner, visuals, architecture, or words, as what the customer wants to see on the site) and because traditional market research methods aren't as fine tuned as they need to be to distinguish the needs of highly segmented markets, few sites really hit the mark when it comes to speaking to their audience.

Meeting the demands of today's high-segmented and fast-paced internet audience requires a new approach. With that in mind, we created a new methodology that we call OpenMind® Research. OpenMind addresses the needs of today's highly segmented and fast-paced internet audience. This proprietary methodology results in specific information about the end-users and the the "owner" of the website. Equally important, we can extract the information from both in a single session. We decide on what type of information we are looking for, for instance, background for creating the tag line, the information architecture, a hierarchy of how information should be delivered on the site, feeling about colors, and degrees of interactivity, etc. Then we gear the research towards those endpoints. In short, we find out how the end user wants to be "told and sold" in their own words. And we really listen to what they say and follow through on what they want. The finished product, or website, is totally unique and often paves the way into new territory that leaves the competition eating your dust.

The first key to successfully creating a website using customer-focused research is to ask all your customers (or end-users) some of the following questions:
● What do you want to see on the website?
● How do you want to see it?
● What are your concerns around this topic?
● How can we solve them?
● What will bring you back to the website?
● What information do you need in order to buy or try a product?

The second key, is to ignore what you think your customer wants, including your own preconceived notions and your biases. The third key is to use the information they've given you in the research. Sometimes this is the most difficult task in the world to do – especially if your client is a large corporation used to thinking a certain way – even if it's a very, very old way of thinking.

Stiefel Laboratories tasked us with developing a very creative, "not your typical boring" pharmaceutical website to launch their new product, called DUAC GEL -- a prescription acne product geared primarily to teenagers with active acne. Their website would be the first and only (other than printed postcards and other "drivers" to the website) means of introducing and "selling" (in pharmaceuticals, you don't sell directly to the consumer, you drive them to their doctor to get a prescription – this process is called Direct-To-Consumer advertising) the product to the end-user. We started with an OpenMind research session. Teenagers with acne, parents of teenagers with acne, and the client took part in the research – all together at the same time – it works.

Teenagers told us WHAT they wanted to see on the site – a flash opening with two fingers moving towards the middle of the screen. The fingers would meet at a big red zit and pop it and pus would cover the screen. The client leaned over to me (yes, the agency was participating as well), and said "I don't think we can get this past regulatory" (in pharmaceuticals, you have to pass marketing ideas through a system of attorneys and s physicians, who tell you whether or not it satisfies FDA rules. Otherwise, it's back to the drawing board).

The kids also told us they were concerned about breaking out on date-night or nights when they had events to attend. They further told us that they would visit our site once and go through the entire site one time and probably never return. IF the site were interesting, they would send their friends.
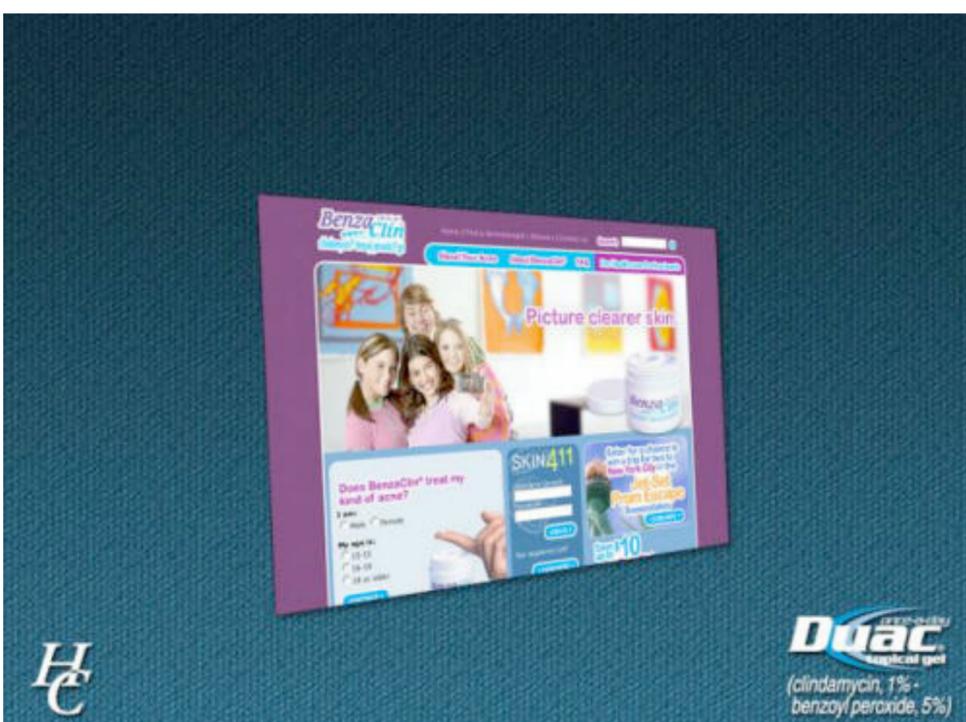
Teenagers are a notoriously fickle audience. They are also completely interactive – brochureware is not going to grab them as much as creating a site that's immediate and interactive all the way through. So that's what we did.

The final result can be seen in the screen capture (the screen capture on the left is the original website – the one on the right reflects a later rebranding effort and is currently the one in use) or by visiting duacgel.com. This site is about creating an experience for the teens – their experience, not yours or the clients. The popping zit idea was kept (albeit toned down a bit) and was used as the navigation. As you go through the site, the zits disappear. The strategic message is … the more you learn about acne and Duac Gel, the less acne you will have.

If you hit the zit emergency button, not only does the zit pop but it takes you to a page that shakes, reflecting the anxiety of teens when they have an acne outbreak. Other sites for similar products, wouldn't include this because it doesn't directly sell their product. By doing this, the teens get what they want, information and a resource. And the client gets what they want, referrals to dermatologists who will write prescriptions. It's a win-win experience. As it should be.

The site is completely interactive throughout, including an educational flash game (the only flash element in the entire site), to the last click, which allows the teens to totally customize their screen savers, and e-cards to friends. And don't forget "fair balance". In pharmaceutical marketing you must present disclaimers about the drug. So instead of putting up a boring disclaimer, we put the fair balance on a package of Duac Gel, and floated it across the screen, like the airplanes you see carrying signs at the beach in summer.

The site went up, and the teens came. In droves. They downloaded a dollars-off introductory coupon. They thoroughly scoured the site. The Duac Gel product manager and the President of the company were happy. However, there was some resistance. Remember at the beginning of this article I said the second key was to ignore what you think your customer wants or your own biases and to give them what they want. A few weeks after www.duacgel.com went live, my client reported this story to me. She was walking down the hallway and passing colleagues, product managers on other brands, who said "we don't like your website." My client, to her credit, responded, "good. This website isn't directed at you."

That is how focused you can make your interactive efforts. Also, by keeping a tight focus, you communicate more efficiently and effectively to your end-users/customers. In short, if you give the customer what they want, the way they want it, they will give you what you want.

That's almost the end of my story. We knew the site was really doing WELL when even the competition started "borrowing" elements from the Duac Gel site and using it on their own. The Differin screen capture on the left is prior to Duac Gel. The screen capture on the right, reflect's a post-Duac Gel reaction. Placement of the girl's face with a swoosh in the upper left hand corner of the homepage, appropriate for Duac Gel's branding, perhaps not for the competitor, showed up. The Language started to "speak" in teenage-ese as opposed to stuffy (and often condescending) pharmaceutical-ese (compare the before and after Differin screen captures). Another competitor, BenzaClin, (post-Duac Gel launch BenzaClin screen capture shown) reacted similarly. The Duac Gel skinformation became skin 411 by BenzaClin. The typeface used in the Duac Gel site is copied by BenzaClin. They say stealing is the best form of flattery. But it also demonstrates how effective the Stiefel Laboratories' efforts were.