Educating GIS Students about Online Marketing

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Introduction - Online Marketing techniques can be used to promote organizations that have GIS data, products or services that they wish to provide. The author believes that GIS programs in colleges and universities should include a small but important component covering what Online Marketing is, what existing online techniques could be used to market GIS organizations, data, products and services. This paper presents a possible module covering Online Marketing of GIS organizations, products and services.

The Need for a GIS Online Marketing Module / Introduction

Students of GIS, Geography or Environmental Studies programs learn GIS tools, analysis techniques, GIS software, creation and modification of GIS data. These activities will benefit students as they enter the workforce and make them productive employees and managers. The products, services and data crated by these organizations may need to be marketed to the outside world. Currently most students in GIS programs are not exposed to the world of online marketing which can help them showcase GIS and its benefits outside of the organizations for which they will work. The benefits can be substantial, and will include sharing data or technology between organizations that complement one another, increasing an organization's customer base, and increasing sales or service levels to existing customers. They will also make these students more marketable once they enter the workforce.

The Audience for a GIS Online Marketing Module

GIS Program Students – Every student in a GIS program at a college or university may benefit from such a module.

Geography students interested in GIS – Will not likely be exposed to Online Marketing elsewhere in the Geography program, and will benefit from such a module beyond GIS.

Environmental Studies students - Will not likely be exposed to Online Marketing elsewhere in the Environmental Studies program, and will benefit from such a module beyond GIS.

The format of a GIS Online Marketing Module
The proposed module is brief and presents the topic at a high-level to introduce students to concepts and possibilities. It consists of lecture material for 1-2 hours, as well as a 1-2 hour lab exploration of methods in front of a computer with internet access.

The Components of the GIS Online Marketing Module
The module will consist of the following sections:
- Evaluating campaign target audience segments
- Evaluating audience needs
- Creating the message
- Understanding different delivery methods
- Scheduling the campaign
- Monitoring, evaluating and enhancing the campaign

These sections are outlined next.

Evaluating Campaign Target Audience Segments
An organization embarking on online marketing to promote itself, it's GIS products or services needs to determine what its target audience is. Will the campaign be focused on government audiences, on businesses or consumers? Who will be targeted in each organization? In the case of government, determine if you wish to approach local, state or federal government. In the case of businesses, determine which business sectors you want to pursue. In the case of consumes, establish their demographic characteristics. In cases where the organization has been conducting traditional marketing, this information may be readily available, and may now be used as a starting point for the online marketing efforts.

Evaluating Audience Needs
Understanding the business of your clients and prospects is important. You must understand how they currently conduct their business, as well as the strengths and limitations of the existing business processes. You must also understand what places on the internet they visit since you will want to showcase your products and services there.

Creating the Message
Discuss what the products or services do to benefit the organization, and its members. Showcase ways in which the product or service will save time, money, simplify operations, and possibly help make money. If your message is being pushed via email to opt-in audiences, you need to make sure that it is not too pushy. Soft sell is preferred to hard sell, and will likely result in less people rejecting your message, and asking to be removed from your email list. Informing and educating your audiences about the benefits of your products or services to them and their organizations will work better then emailing them an

offer to buy. Your email can consist of a link to your website where the actual sale can take place.

Understanding Different Delivery Methods
Different approaches are available for delivery of marketing messages online; each with different costs and benefits. These approaches include:

Email Marketing - An important approach which may not require a financial investment is email marketing. An organization may utilize its internal email list(s) to be in touch with various stakeholders including clients, prospects, and suppliers of the organization. Software such as Microsoft Outlook may be utilized to mass-email a personal message to a group of contacts, with it's email merge functionality.

The larger the email list, the more individuals/contacts will be aware of your organization's message. There are a number of approaches to collecting and utilizing an email list. The emails collected should be opt-in emails, that is, emails of people that you have had some contact with, and that have provided you with permission to contact them.

One approach to collecting emails for an opt-in list, is attending conferences, meeting people at booths, in the hallways, at seminars, and asking them for their business cards to follow-up with them at a later date. You could start an opt-in email relationship by following up with an email immediately following a conference, indicating how nice it was to meet them at the conference, or how informative it was to visit their booth, and asking for additional information about their organizations, products or services.

Electronic Mailing Lists - Electronic mailing lists are email discussions for people with similar interests which you can join to discuss GIS related topics. An email address is assigned to a group of people. You subscribe to the list. Once subscribed, any message you send to the list will be sent to everyone in the group. For example, you can find many GIS electronic mailing lists by visiting www.lsoft.com/lists/list_q.html. This site allows search for LISTSERV lists related to GIS. The three other popular list administration software are: Majodomo, Listproc and Almanac.

Newsgroups / Discussion Groups - A newsgroup is part of the usenet news system. Usenet news is a collection of thousands of different discussion groups on a huge variety of topics. Participants write articles which can then be read by any person who has access to the usenet news system.

In order to have access to the usenet news system, your site must be set up for usenet news. You should ask your system administrator or support staff whether usenet news is available, and how to access it. Commercial on-line services traditionally offer usenet news access.

Alternatively, there are web sites where you can read usenet news, such as Google Groups. You can find these by clicking the Groups link at www.google.com. You can then search for "Geographic Information Systems". You will find groups such as comp.infosystems.gis. You can post messages or reply to messages posted by others. Both activities will increase exposure to your organization, products or services. You can reply by showing interest in the work of others, and later showcase yours work to them.

Some groups are listed on http://home.earthlink.net/~rpminfonet/gislist.html. For example, you can subscribe to ESRI-L ArcInfo Users Group which covers Discussion of issues relating to ArcInfo products by To subscribe, send an E-mail message and in the body of the message, write subscribe to E-Mail Address: esri-l-request@esri.com.

Reading Industry Publications - You may follow-up with people that write articles to congratulate them for the articles they wrote and introduce yourself. You may also follow-up with people that are mentioned in articles to congratulate them for appearing in an article and asking to find more about their work. These are ways to start relationships with people you have not met yet in your industry. An example of an industry publication is Geospatial Solutions. You can find information about it at www.geospatial-online.com/geospatialsolutions)

Writing for Industry Publications - Industry publications constantly look for articles about new products, services, or interesting people in the industry. You may take your organization's work, and re-format it into publishable article. When you submit the article to the publication, make sure to include a brief biography of yourself, and information about your organization, products and/or services. Make sure to include your email address. People interested in what you write will email you their feedback. Examples of publications to which you can write include GeoWorld, GeoSpatial Solutions, or company specific publications such as ArcUser.

GIS Portals - Submit your website to a GIS portal. For example, you can submit your website to www.gisportal.com or www.gisuser.com. The more linked you are to other GIS websites, the more people will know about you. Since GIS portals bring many GIS users together, you can gain substantial exposure with such links. Additional GIS portals include: www.gisuser.com; www.geocommunity.com; and www.directionsmag.com.

Press Releases - A Press Release is a vital tool for announcing your business, or a new service within your business, to the media. The media consists of editors and journalist for newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and trade publication, as well as television and radio stations. This type of marketing informs journalist, editors and producers that you and your service are available to be interviewed for their publication. When you are featured in an article you gain credibility with your buying audience. It says that you are a leader in your

field and newsworthy. While an ad is a very acceptable form of marketing a product or service, an article can not be purchased. An ad says that you are paying for others to see this and buy from you, while getting featured in a publication announces you and your product or service as newsworthy. It creates a bigger impact much faster than a paid ad can create.

You can submit a press release to websites. For example www.gislounge.com via email to the editor editor@gislounge.com. You can also submit your PR to www.giscafe.com. Free submission is available at www.geoplace.com.

Website Links - You may suggest that websites add links to your GIS website, to an information website you create, or to other websites that already feature your website, your company, products or services. This will allow visitors to other websites to find these links, and follow them to your website, were you showcase your organization, and allow visitors to contact you. For example www.gislounge.com allows link submission at http://gislounge.com/freisin/submiturl.shtml.

GIS User Groups - Groups of users of GIS software have formed throughout the country and worldwide. Some groups are region-specific; others are more global in their reach. ESRI and other GIS company's groups can be found on company websites such as www.esri.com or on GIS Portals such as www.giscafe.com.

GIS Electronic Newsletters - Subscription to newsletters of different GIS related companies and organizations can provide you with information about people which you can follow-up with and establish an online relationship. You may also be able to contribute some of your written work to these newsletters, thus providing many others with access to you.

Event Submission - You may organize a local GIS event in your city. You can submit the URL about this event to various websites. For example www.gislounge.com allows event submission at no cost. Visit http://gislounge.com/conf/subconf.shtml and enter the event's name, date, location, URL, and additional description. You will have people interested in the event directed to your website. Some may register, and you will increase your opt-in email list. You can submit an event at www.geoplace.com; you can also submit your event to www.giscafe.com via email to gismarketing@ibsystems.com, or at www.gisdevelopment.net.

Article Submission - Submit articles, technical papers and other GIS content to websites. For example www.gislounge.com allows article submission at www.gislounge.com/library/blsubarticle.shtml. You will be asked to enter your name, email, and submit the article for review. The www.giscafe.com website allows submission of a variety of articles as well as, technical papers.

Discussion Forums - A discussion forum is a database that stores, sorts, organizes and manages messages submitted by participants as contributions to ongoing discussions. The forum allows participants to read, create and respond to messages on the Internet. For example, www.giscafe.com has a number of discussion forums:

- GIS Education, Business Geographics, GIS Tools, GIS - Remote Sensing; Imagery, Data and Metadata, GIS User News and

There are a number of forums available at www.geoplace.com, including:

- Careers, Data Discovery, Enterprise Integration, GeoWorld Magazine Feedback, Location-Based Services, Policy, Troubleshooting Tips.

Text Advertisement - You can pay to advertise your organization, its products or services. Text ads traditionally cost less then display ads. You need to consider if text ads are sufficiently effective for your purpose. As an example, www.giscafe.com allows submission of text ads up to 40 words in length.

Banner Advertisement - Display ads may include graphics in addition to text, and may be more visually appealing to your audience. The www.giscafe.com website allows submission of 234x60 pixel GIF or 125x125 GIF (10KB file size, up to three rotations), and also include the click-through URL.

PowerPoint Presentation Submission - Some websites may allow for submission of PowerPoint presentations of your activities. Once such site is www.giscafe.com.

Company Profile and Logo Submission - Your company's profile and logo may be submitted to different websites. For example, www.giscafe.com allows submission of your company profile. At www.geoplace.com you can submit a basic company listing at no cost. For a small fee, you can add your logo, and email contact information, as well as provide a longer description of your company, products and services. At www.gisdevelopment.com you can submit your company profile for free at http://www.gisdevelopment.net/company/registration.asp. These submissions will increase awareness of your organization, and allow more people to visit your website and contact you.

Downloads Submission - You may have an evaluation version of a product that you wish to sell. You should considering providing your product to websites which will offer it as a free download to their visitors. For example, www.giscafe.com allows submission of evaluation software, or free-ware. It requests your contact name, email, company name, URL, download description, the actual file, and for you to select the category to which the download belongs – from a list.

Jobs Submission - Submitting job postings for your organization exposes you to many people actively seeking jobs in the industry, and which will eventually

become members of your or other organizations. This is your opportunity to showcase your organization is a positive way while posting a job advertisement. You may, for example submit job posting at www.giscafe.com. You may also post jobs for a fee at www.gisjobs.com, the GIS Jobs Clearinghouse at www.gjc.com.

Web Directory Submission - A Web Directory is an Internet search tool that searches for information by subject categories. People create web directories, so they only include information that a real person inputs into them. If you have a very broad or generic search, it is better to start with a web directory rather then a search engine. You can submit your website to Yahoo Directory > Science > Geography > Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Basic submission may be free or for a fee.

Guest Book Submission - Some websites allow their guests to record their visits. For example, at www.gisdevelopment.net you can submit your name, email and opinion to their website. Other visitors may be interested to see who else visited the site, and encounter your listings. If your comments interest them, they may contact you.

Thesis Submission - You can submit your Ph.D., Masters Dissertation, or internship report to websites. For example you can submit your deliverable to www.GISdevelopment.net by emailing info@gisdevelopment.net. This will provide exposure to your work.

Scheduling the Campaign
The time when the message is sent is an important parameter in the case of email marketing. Emailing at certain hours of the day may produce better results then others. Emailing too frequently can produce a negative effect, where some people will ask to be removed from your email list. A holiday message is less likely to be rejected, and will serve as a reminder of your organization, its products or services.

Monitoring, Evaluating and Enhancing the Campaign
Test each message on a limited scale, evaluate the response, and make adjustments to the message, delivery methods, and the scheduling of the campaign.