
Fine Tuning the Site Tour

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Trying to determine the best approach to a site tour is not the exacting science that it would seem to be. For years, webmasters have looked for the perfect blend of content and information that grabs the eye of the passerby and motivates a desire to click the "buy" link. There is lots of data that suggests that one method of tour setup performs better than another; but on careful analysis, the results are at best subjective. There are tons of variables that apply to the designing of a site tour, not the least of which take into consideration niche, target audience, method of delivery and marketing approach.

In almost all cases the premium site tour should be reflective of your target audience. But what exactly defines your target audience?

Most experienced webmasters would agree that there is no quantifiable measure of a target audience outside of a niche of interest. Instead, there is a series of generalities that seems to target specific audience types. More specifically, tours tend to target certain "traits" of surfers. These "traits" are more specific in nature than that of the broader term, "target audience." There are more or less four schools of thought on the makeup of surfer traits and the tour types that appeal to them. I will try to give a basic understanding of these traits and what makes them appealing to surfers as well as the content they represent.

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Full-page ad (FPA) style: The FPA style of tour is a good general application tour. The vast majority of the tour is made up of a graphic design, is very brief in terms of the site itself and sometimes doesn't even mention the price of the subscription until the surfer clicks the buy option. Commonly made up of no more than four or five pages of screen-size graphics, the appeal is as much in the flash and the style of the graphics as it is the content that the site offers. Data shows that these kinds of tours appeal more to the curiosity seekers, as well as surfers prone to click and run.

Content style samplers: In competitive niches and general category sites, "content sampler" style tours are a little more wordy than the above FPA; and through the use of previews, give an often fixed representation of the type of materials available on the inside of the site. Often using elements of the FPA in terms of graphics, these tours are still fairly brief in nature. Data shows that surfers that are attracted to these tours are a bit more fickle in what they are looking for, but still quick on the backspace button. The tours are built for a little more pre-qualifying information on the website inside and loan themselves for better search engine results. Tours like this are well suited to appeal to traffic from general interest link lists.

Comprehensive content tour: This is a fairly aggressive pre-qualification of what's inside the web site. The tours often feature sections of the models that appear within the site as well as dynamic content samples that match the update frequency of the website. Descriptions are usually much more wordy than either of the other two categories and are

geared to not only search engine placement but also for very descriptive web content. Data shows that this tour is used to attract the enthusiasts of a particular genre and normally apply to very niche-specific sites. Traffic guided to these tours is best drawn from niche specific specialty lists in competitive categories.

Operational tour: These types of tours have actually been around for a while but are only recently becoming widely used. These tours are for all intents and purposes the actual web site itself. The intention of the tour is to project the actual look and feel of being a member. Sections of the website may be free and available from this tour. Premium content, when clicked on, would prompt a member for his username and password and in the absence of that, redirect to a sign up screen. The obvious advantages here would be no need to maintain a separate tour since your normal updates do that for you. Tours of this nature often are used in websites that have a lot of interactive content, such as forums, articles and games. Data shows these tours to be particularly effective for surfers that like a full course of "try before you buy." The appeal is the tease of what is not shown. While I have seen these kinds of tours operated across a variety of traffic sources, they seem to be most effective in genre-specific interests generated from specialty link lists.

Is it ever a good idea to run several tours? Without question, there are many web operations that run multiple tours; many of them target the tours based on their avenues of traffic. For example, traffic coming from specialty lists might target that traffic to a more comprehensive tour where users are more apt to be looking for a site with a particular flavor. Another source of traffic coming from a search engine, for example, may be directed to a brief tour to take advantage of the curiosity seekers. Depending on your marketing efforts and the places where that marketing resides, it is not uncommon to run all four categories as well as a few more specialty tours not discussed here. Premium web site tours cannot be thought of as a "one size fits all" sort of product that will fit every web site.

The key to site tours is experimentation. Data resulting from other websites and their experiences are almost certainly not going to be the same across all websites. Webmasters would be doing themselves a disservice if they didn't explore multiple tour options. It is important to collect and evaluate the data for yourself, as it is the only effective method to determining what makes sense for your operation.

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