"What message does your firm's Web site send?"

Does your CPA firm recognize that the real purpose and value of a Web site is to serve as your most important marketing tool?

Does your site sell by providing prospects with information that meets their needs and answers their questions? Or does your site merely inform prospects of your services, specialties and experience from your standpoint? A really effective Web site is written from the prospect's standpoint not from yours or your firm's.

Your Web site should be created to identify who you are, as well as the services you provide and how your provide them, but you should always put yourself in your prospects' place, anticipating what they want and need to know. Today, even if your business is built on word of mouth, as most CPA firms' are, your potential client will most likely check out your Web site before giving you a call.

The all-important home page must be clear, concise and uncluttered. According to a recent study conducted at Carleton University in Ottawa, a person viewing a Web site is turned on or off by it in one-twentieth of a second - less time than it takes to blink an eye which means that your headline and graphics must be appealing to your potential client or you'll be turned out in less than a second.

A personal service

An effective Web site has to answer questions and provide comprehensive information. Your Web site must be informative, appealing, honest and written succinctly. Most of all, it should convince a prospect that your provide more and better personal service than your competitors, that your firm prides itself on providing personal care, and that you're always available to answer questions and meet client needs.

When you boil it down to the lowest common denominator, accountancy is one of the most personal services a prospect needs so he must be assured that your provide that extra special care, interest and attention.

There's lots of competition

Every accountant is up against stiff competition today.

In 2004 the latest available figures there were approximately 335,000 licensed CPAs practicing in the U.S. Some 4,430 firms employ five or more CPAs out of a total of 44,416 firms (including one-person offices). There's fierce new competition out there from H&R Block and American Express, both of which advertise heavily and can pose a threat to smaller firms whose services are often more expensive.

Clients need to be sure that you'll work with them, and guide them in protecting their wealth. They want to know that you're always on top of new taxation laws and will support them effectively in the event of an audit. Citing case histories of winning audits (minus anything proprietary) is supportive and helpful. This is information that needs to be on your Web site, but too often is lacking. CPA Web material is frequently cut and dried and anything but a convincing sales tool.

Recently, my partners and I were called on to write a Web site for a CPA firm, so our first step was to research other CPA sites. That's when we realized that CPAs desperately need help selling themselves. What we found surprised us because, with few exceptions, CPA sites provide little information and certainly don't answer the questions that a prospect probably has. There are several writing services that prepare, set up and service Web sites specifically for accountants, but they tend to follow a formula, instead of stressing the individual CPA's abilities, experience and services.

Many years ago, my first boss in marketing advised me to be constantly aware that a potential client can do nothing about products or services that he doesn't know about. A greater marketing truth has never been told. Translation: Your Web site is one of the few places where your can effectively market your services to potential clients in a believable way so make sure it emphasizes all your positives.

The prospects' perspective

Choosing the right CPA firm or the right accountant can be the most critical financial decision a person ever makes a decision that could impact their finances for the rest of their life. Choosing the right CPA can make or break a corporation, as well.

A client seeking a CPA usually first asks friends or business acquaintances for referrals, then looks up the recommended firm(s) online, so the Web site must offer information that appeals to them. Your prospect needs to know that their chosen firm will provide firm will provide aggressive advocacy and have the right skill set in case of an audit or even a court trial. In case forensics are required, they must know that their chosen firm capably provides that service. A prospect needs to be sure that his CPA is experienced in doing battle and will fight for their rights in such cases and win! They want to feel confident that they are of primary interest to you not just another client. Every client demands personal attention, so it's up to your Web site to assure them that they'll get it.

So what should an effective CPA Web contain? First, it must contain search-engine-friendly words and phrases. This can only be achieved through trial, error and exhaustive research. If a prospect Googles or Yahoos an accounting firm, the words and

phrases must be carefully selected in order to have the greatest probability to lead to your firm.

It should also contain the specialties of your firm – corporate, individual, partnerships, taxes, bankruptcy, audits, forensics, international trade, suppliers of back-up information for litigation, estate, etc.

List your contact information on every page of the site. No one has the patience to go back and hunt for it. Would you? Include headquarters as well as offices in other cities, state or countries. List all the state in which you are licensed, should a client (individual or corporate) have multiple offices or residences inside the U.S., as well as outside. List affiliated outside the U.S.

Potential clients want to know the types of clients that your concentrate on. For example, for a corporation, how have you successfully handled Internal Revenue Service audits? state audits? trial cases? The same goes for individuals. Again, you can do this without listing proprietary information.

Frequently asked questions are really helpful because they show that you have insight into a client's thought processes their questions and concerns. By the way, the temptation is great to provide answers as well, but that defeats the purpose. Always put yourself in your prospect's shoes: What would you like to know about selecting the right firm?

Today, the languages that your firm's accountants are fluent in are important, because many clients are from other countries and only feel comfortable speaking their own language especially when it's a subject as important as their personal finances.

As for graphics, CPA sites often lack creativity, using stock art (though some of it is effective and interesting) plus smiling photos of partners. Though your site text is the major factor, especially when a client is facing problems, graphics can draw people in an add sophistication. Though not the primary focus, artwork and design are important.

Regardless of its objective, your Web site must be written so that it sells, informs and builds confidence. Most important: It must be written with your client's needs in mind.

It's nothing personal just business.