“It’s over, man.”

Those were the last words left (via an audio .wav file) on the home page of one recently deceased dot-corn business.

And that pretty much sums things up for hundreds of other Internet businesses that have bit the dust during the dot-corn crash of 2000. This has led news media and technology experts to declare that the “over-hyped” Internet has proven to be a colossal disappointment.

So, does this mean that construction businesses should forget about the Internet as a means of promoting their businesses and communicating with customers?

Absolutely not. In fact, looking at the results of a recent building industry survey conducted by Hanky-Wood, LLC (publisher of Builder magazine), one could say that for building businesses “it’s just beginning, man.”

According to the survey, building industry professionals are now using the Internet more than ever to find information about
needed products and services. Seventy-five percent of those surveyed (all senior level executives) said they use the Web to research products. Nearly 60 percent said they use the Web to look for suppliers.

Specifically, the survey found the following:

- Ninety percent of architects use the Internet to research products.
- Ninety-one percent of remodelers use the Internet to research products.
- And, 76 percent of builders use the Internet to research products.

The bottom line is this: Your customers are on the Web. The question is: What are you doing about it?

**Online Marketing Models**

Building your business on the Internet is all about marketing. And, there are all kinds of marketing strategies that have been used to promote Web sites and e-businesses.

The over-riding marketing strategy for many major pure-play dotcoms was to do anything and everything possible to create market share. Profitability models were tossed out the window in favor of Super Bowl advertising, cash give-aways and William Shatner-hosted TV commercials. Actually making money was, in many cases, not even a consideration (at least over the “short term”). Building awareness and customer loyalty was paramount.

Construction industry brick-and-mortar businesses, on the other hand, generally create Web sites with a far different purpose. In most cases, brick-and-mortar sites function primarily as an online brochure, showcasing a company’s products, services, expertise, etc. In some cases, the site is also used to generate revenue (sell products). But in virtually no cases is the goal to “do whatever it takes” to gain market share.

A key point here is that when the bottom fell out and the cash ran low for the dotcoms’ “gain market share” strategy beginning in mid-2000, the pure-play crash had virtually no effect whatsoever on how most brick-and-mortar businesses utilize the Web. Homeowners, builders, architects, facility owners and other purchasers of building products and services continue to rely on the Internet as a primary information source for researching products and locating providers.

That’s why the Internet continues to offer a huge marketing upside for construction businesses, such as contractors, builders, manufacturers and dealers/distributors. And that upside is continuing to grow. Don’t be dismayed by the fact that Priceline.com isn’t doing well or even by the fact that B2B construction marketplaces are still searching for a workable model. Your customers are on the Web . . . and they’re looking for information about building products and services.
So, you might ask, if that’s the fact, why isn’t our Web site bringing in more inquiries? Why isn’t it generating more business leads?

And that brings us back to marketing.

**Zen and the Art of Internet Marketing**

The most basic goal for any Web site is to attract as many targeted visitors as possible. In accomplishing this, there are several stages of online “marketing awareness” that businesses typically go through.

The first stage is centered around the belief that simply building a Web site is all that is needed to generate new online inquiries, business and sales. This approach is only half right. It brings to mind the old Zen riddle: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

While the meaning of that riddle remains largely unknown (at least to me), we do know that creating a successful Web site or e-business, requires two hands clapping. One hand is the Web site itself and the other hand is your marketing and publicity efforts.

In short, you need to promote the fact that your site exists. Given the fact that there are now millions of business Web sites on the Internet—and no guaranteed way to find any of them—a site simply cannot be successful without at least some degree of marketing behind it.

In the second stage of marketing awareness, businesses now realize that they need to promote their site, so they implement a number of conventional, tried-and-true marketing strategies. These strategies include advertising, public relations, trade show promotions, direct mail, packaging promotions, sponsorships, etc.

According to the Hanley-Wood survey, construction industry businesses most commonly market Web sites via newspapers/magazines, trade shows and trade publications.

These types of marketing efforts are all essential strategies that will enhance awareness and bring increased traffic to a site. However, this is where most construction businesses stop. And that’s unfortunate because some of the most effective strategies for increasing awareness on the Web go beyond tried-and-true traditional marketing strategies. These strategies are right on the Internet—right where your online customers are.

No, we’re not talking about banner advertising. Banner ad click-through rates have been declining for years. They’re now down to approximately one-half of one percent, and that’s certainly not good.

Rather, look at options such as search engine optimization, site linking campaigns and e-mail marketing. When done correctly, these are proven online marketing strategies that can deliver outstanding results and excellent returns on investment.

**Search Engine Optimization**

Search engine optimization programs are designed to enhance how well a Web site ranks on the Internet’s top search engines. With more than 90 million Web users conducting search inquiries each month, search engines are the primary means for finding information (and businesses) on the Internet. Maximizing your company’s ability to tap into this traffic flow can have a major impact.

The goal of a search engine optimization campaign is to achieve best-possible rankings for your business under specific keyword searches. (A keyword search is the word or phrase that users enter into search engine inquiry forms.) If your site isn’t listed on the first 20 to 40 results for any given keyword, the search engines probably aren’t doing you a whole lot of good. That’s because most Web users don’t look beyond the first one or two pages of results (usually 20 to 40 listings).

To enhance search engine rankings, there are many strategies that can be employed. The first and most basic is to register your site with all the major search engines and directories. There are hundreds of general interest search engines and directories, but only a dozen or so really matter. (See list of major search engines on page 82.) Make sure your site is registered with the big ones.

Before registering, it’s important to make sure that your home page and key
sub-pages are “search engine friendly”. There are a variety of tactics that can be employed, and there are plenty of information resources on the Web that tell you exactly what to do.

If you’re really serious about getting high search engine rankings, consider developing “doorway pages.”

Doorway pages are very commonly used by all sorts of businesses and can be a highly effective tactic for increasing targeted site traffic. Essentially, these are static HTML pages that are designed to give search engines exactly what they’re looking for—short descriptive copy, loaded with keywords, HTML links, minimal graphics and no complex programming.

There’s a whole “science” devoted to the creation of doorway pages. Professional and amateur search engine specialists are constantly monitoring, examining and dissecting Web pages that rank at the top of leading search engine keyword searches.

The ultimate goal is to create one doorway page for one keyword that meets the specific criteria for one of the top search engines. (The major search engines use varying algorithms for determining ‘how pages rank.’) And then repeat the process for all major search engines.

Creating effective doorway pages requires a thorough understanding of exactly how search engines operate . . . and that’s a full-time job. That’s why it’s best to contract with a search engine consultant to implement a doorway page strategy. Costs for these services vary, but expect to pay several thousand dollars for a baseline program. The results can be significant.

One word of caution about search engine registrations: There are a number of online services that claim to be able to submit a site to hundreds of search engines for a fee of $200 (or $20—it varies). While it may sound like a bargain, it usually isn’t.

These services use software programs that automate the submission process. Because all major search engines ask for a unique set of information during the
submission process, it’s difficult to achieve optimal results through automation. These services also have a loose definition of what a search engine is. They usually submit your site to dozens of link list sites, known as “free for alls” (FFAs). FFAs are simply collections of randomly organized links. These sites will not drive any qualified traffic to your site. Worse yet, once you submit to these sites, you’ll usually wind up receiving unwanted “spam” e-mails.

**Site Linking Campaigns**

A site linking campaign, as the name implies, is designed to create as many high-quality links to your site as possible from related industry sites. In the online building and home interest arenas, there are literally hundreds of sites that offer linking possibilities for product manufacturers, dealers and distributors and service providers. By establishing as many links as possible to your site, you’re creating multiple pathways for targeted users to find your site.

Will each link you create immediately bring in hundreds of new visitors to your site? No. Will the cumulative effect of an effective link campaign result in significantly increased, highly targeted traffic? Yes.

An important additional benefit of site linking is the fact that it can positively impact how high your site ranks on the major search engines. Google, the search engine that Yahoo uses, and other leading search engines are now giving much more emphasis to “site popularity” (the number of links to a Web site). The thinking is that a site with dozens or hundreds of link leading to it must be a superior site to one with only a few links to it. Therefore, “popular” sites are being ranked higher than “unpopular” sites. Whatever the case, creating as many links as possible to your site can help achieve higher search engine rankings.

A site linking campaign can also be accomplished in-house, but be prepared to spend a considerable amount of time researching potential link sites and submitting requests for links.

Both site linking and search engine opti-
mization strategies work because each is fundamentally aligned with the basic nature of the Internet. They enable businesses to communicate with Web users exactly when those users are openly seeking information about a particular business, product or service.

E-Mail Marketing Campaigns

Finally, there's e-mail marketing. Nearly all e-commerce and pure-play dot-com sites offer e-mail newsletters that keep customers informed about sales, specials and site news. Customer response rates for e-mail marketing are far superior than banner advertising and its usage is expected to grow dramatically in coming months and years.

But e-mail marketing isn’t only just for commerce sites. It offers all businesses an excellent means for maintaining online contact with customers and prospects—keeping your business top-of-mind.

The key to a successful e-mail newsletter is content. Offer subscribers value-added articles and news, such as how-to information, technical information, case study articles, industry news, insights into your business, etc. Done well, an e-mail newsletter offers one of the strongest—and most cost-efficient—means of enhancing customer interest and loyalty.

Will all these strategies bring your Web site to a state of “Internet nirvana”, where traffic is high, repeat visitors are numerous and sales are growing? That’s a definite maybe. Like any other marketing, advertising or PR program, Internet marketing offers no guarantees. But by reaching out to your customers on the Web through search engines, sites links and e-mail correspondence, you’ll be making all the right moves to increase awareness of your business and maximize the investment you made in building your site.

About the Author
Marty Duffy is a founding partner of Building Channels (www.buildingchannels.com), a business providing news, marketing and public relations services for building, AEC and DIY businesses.