

Distribution and the Evolving Web

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If you spend time on the Internet, you may have noticed a subtle but important shift in the way web sites are beginning to interact with visitors. Web sites that feature static content have faded away and are being replaced by interactive web sites that engage the user. This recent shift in content — termed Web 2.0 — reflects the idea that the web is moving into its next generation of interactivity.

The electronic component industry is certainly not exempt from this recent web trend. Many distributors have already done a considerable amount to beef up their web sites in response to engineers' changing preference of obtaining information on the Internet in recent years. As distributors are quickly learning, they must do even more to keep engineers engaged and returning to their web site.

Changing customer attitudes are forcing electronic component distributors to embrace the Web 2.0 movement and cater their web sites toward today's users. This means that distributors must frequently revamp their web sites and offer fresh content and new features to engineers and other visitors.

Search & Find



Over the past few years, distributors have focused much of their efforts on enhancing their web sites with search navigation tools, hoping that a better search engine will help make it easier for engineers to find and purchase parts online. Several distributors have partnered with e-commerce solution providers to optimize their online search engines.

However, distributors have recognized that engineers also want advanced search functions. Thus, many distributors offer functions including parametric filters based on technical specifications. For example, customers can sort and narrow searches for resistors on the Allied Electronics web site by resistance, power ratings and voltage and can search for capacitors by capacitance, tolerance, voltage and ESR.

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While the ultimate goal of a distributor web site may vary, most distributors will agree that the web sites should provide the engineer with all the information they need to make their purchasing decision. Detailed product descriptions, specifications and photographs are what engineers have come to expect from distributor web sites. That's one reason that distributors now feature thousands of downloadable product datasheets on their web sites.

Interactive Experience

With engineers turning to the web for everything from product information to design tips, many distributors have taken their web sites a step further with new interactive tools and features. Several distributors have teamed up with manufacturers to offer online product training and webinars. Webinars proved to be a timely and relevant tool as distributors disseminated information to engineers about the RoHS regulations that went into effect last year.

Interactive virtual catalogs are yet another tool that many distributors offer via their web sites. Virtual catalogs engage online customers that prefer to search for products using a distributor's print catalog, but may not have it readily available. Online customers can navigate a virtual catalog using their mouse to "flip" through virtual pages and can quickly turn to a specific page with one click. Many distributors allow visitors to bookmark pages in a virtual catalog, zoom in on a virtual catalog page and link directly to an online product page.

Perhaps one of the most underutilized features of distributor web sites is the use of interactive social technology. Few distributors have taken advantage of online customer feedback or interactive customer forums. However, engineers can expect that distributors will soon embrace these web trends and use them to benefit customers.



Purchasing Management

Along with changing attitudes on how they use the web, customers are increasingly demanding more control over their online purchasing experience. While online purchasing was a great benefit for customers in the past, they expect a web site to do much more than take their order. Many distributors offer a variety of self-service

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options online, including the ability to check order status and order history. In addition to finding technical data and real-time pricing, customers want to track their orders and check stock availability

Some distributors give customers the option to apply their own part numbers to an online order and upload a bill of materials. In addition, many distributors have implemented punch-out systems that work with a customer's ERP system and allow them to place orders directly from their company's system.

Distributors are also taking purchasing management to the next level. For example, Allied's web site offers a purchasing management process that allows multiple customers to add products to a shopping cart and then submit to a purchasing manager who approves them and submits the order.

Customer Acquisition

The web not only serves as a customer-oriented solution; it also provides tremendous value for distributors. Web sites allow distributors to provide instant and convenient information to customers 24/7. They also help distributors more easily serve customers in larger firms that may manage purchasing through a single purchasing manager.

The web is also proving to be an effective channel for new customer acquisition. One way for distributors to capture new customers online is to ensure that their web sites and online purchasing processes are integrated with their traditional sales channel.

The web is not only changing how engineers obtain product information, it is changing how distributors do business with customers. As engineers and companies continue to embrace the web and the new capabilities it offers, electronic component distributors will be faced with the increased demand for interactive content and enhanced web site functions. It will be up to distributors to come up with innovative online solutions to remain competitive in the marketplace.

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