Internet Use

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Internet use is growing quickly. Currently, approximately 3.6 billion people worldwide use the Internet (Internet Stats, 2016). One of the primary uses of the Internet for many consumers is shopping online. More and more companies are selling products, providing customer support, and doing market research via websites.

Market Research

Marketing research firms make data available in a variety of forms for business needs. They focus on the customer and the market. Marketing research firms use questionnaires and interviews to gather information about consumer behaviors and attitudes. They also look at marketing trends and collect valuable demographic data. The U. S. Census Bureau (2016) describes the demographic data it provides:

The Population Estimates Program publishes total resident population estimates and demographic components of change (births, deaths, and migration) each year. We also publish the estimates by demographic characteristics (age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin) for the nation, states, and counties.

Computer technology makes it possible for researchers to collect a variety of data, analyze huge amounts of information, and forecast market conditions. For example, customers who buy online typically provide information about themselves to the company. This information is called a customer profile. Companies may also build their store of information about online customers by using cookies. Cookies are messages exchanged by the user’s web browser and the web server being visited. They can be used to track the user’s identity and online behavior. The information acquired from online customers allows the business to analyze customer buying habits. Then the company can suggest related products that may be of interest to a customer.

Mailing Lists

A mailing list is a directory of Internet user addresses of people who want to have information about a topic delivered regularly to their addresses. Some mailing lists are maintained by businesses while other lists are private. The user subscribes to the mailing list to receive messages. Mailing lists can be used to gather market data or to advertise products. Many websites that sell products have an option users can select to be added to a mailing list. Reputable sites also have a method that allows users to unsubscribe from the mailing list.

E-commerce

E-commerce has created a lack of geographic boundaries for many businesses. This brings new challenges in communicating and sharing information with people of many countries and cultures. Websites must be designed to be attractive and easy to use for all customers. Internet users by world region are shown in the following chart.



Electronic Mail

One popular use of the Internet is electronic mail, or email. Email is the electronic transfer of messages. LANs and WANs offer email to all computers that are connected, whether they are in the same office or in different countries. Users are limited to sending and receiving messages only to and from those on their network unless their network is connected to the Internet. If they are connected to the Internet, they can send and receive messages all over the world.

Email messages may contain not only text, but also audio and graphics. Messages advertising products or sales can include photos or links to a company website. When an email file is received, it is automatically stored in a user’s electronic mailbox. An email mailbox is an online computer storage space designated to hold electronic messages. These messages are stored for the owner of the mailbox and may be read, saved for later reference, printed, or deleted. Email is inexpensive, fast, and easy to use for workers at all levels in organizations.

Web Browsers

A web browser is a software program that provides navigation and search tools to help users find topics and locations on the World Wide Web. URLs (Uniform Resource Locators) are Internet addresses that can be understood by any web browser as it searches for hypertext documents on computers around the world. URL addresses start with *http://,* which stands for *hypertext transfer protocol*. This is a set of instructions telling computers how to send and receive hypertext data and documents. The *www* in the URL stands for *World Wide Web*. Periods in the URL are separators and are pronounced *dot.* Ending letters in the URL represent the domain name. Some common domain names are *edu* for education, *org* for organization, *com* for commercial, and *gov* for government. Other parts of the URL identify sections or levels within the website.

A two-letter country code is used at the end of some address. Every country has its own unique geographic domain code. For example, *uk* is used for the United Kingdom and *mx* is used for Mexico. If there is no geographic code in a name, then the domain is located within your own country.

When you want to visit a location on the Internet, you may do so by entering the URL address in your browser. Users should pay close attention to spelling, punctuation, symbols, and capitalization when entering the address. URLs are sensitive to the use of upper- and lowercase letters. Users may also move to a different location on the Internet by clicking a hyperlink. When using hyperlinks, the associated URLs are often invisible. The user merely clicks on the hyperlink, and the browser moves to the Internet address (URL) that is associated with that hyperlink.

Browsers enable users to customize searches and help locate information from several information sources. Though the programs vary in appearance, they offer many of the same features. Examples of browsers include Firefox and Internet Explorer.

Newsgroups

Newsgroups publish online articles and messages related to a huge number of topics. Users participate in public discussions about a topic by sending messages that all participants in the newsgroup can read. Newsgroups are available for thousands of topics. Some companies sponsor newsgroups related to their products. Users can ask questions or make comments about products. These questions and comments can help the company improve products or suggest companion products the company may want to offer.

Search Engines

Many search tools, often referred to as search engines, can help users locate sites on the Internet. Some widely used search engines include Google, AltaVista, and Yahoo!. To perform a search on most websites, simply identify and type two or three keywords related to the topic and then click the search button. The search tool will locate sites/documents, called “matches” or “hits,” that contain these keywords. The search may result in no matches, several matches, or thousands of matches. If the search results in a large number of matches, more specific keywords can be used to locate the information. On the other hand, if there are only a few hits, users may have to broaden the search by using more general keywords. Using several search tools helps ensure a thorough search because not all search tools look at every site that may contain the information you need.

A company or organization can pay some search engine sites to have its website appear in the hits list when a search is done using certain keywords. The website name usually appears at the top of the hits list. It may be identified with a heading such as *Sponsored Links*. Using this strategy can increase the visits to an organization’s website where users will find ads or information about products, services, or activities the organization wishes to promote.

References

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