

Why You Need A Personal Website

A personal website is the vital link between the CEO of a medium-sized company and his esteemed customers, a platform for exchanging ideas, airing grievances, sharing valuable information, etc. It is the human face of an organisation and the bridge to building lasting relationships and loyalties that a company needs to survive in the rat race. That is why you need it.



>> Key Benefits

- Your personal website can serve as a gateway to reach your customers
- It's a perfect platform to exchange ideas, suggestions and opinions
- You can nip the customer-related problems in the bud



Orion is a leading provider of lifestyle products. Founder and CEO Ram Kumar* started Orion in 1987 by selling household goods. Later, he switched to healthcare and lifestyle products, making Orion the leading company in the respective sectors. During the initial years, Ram directly interacted with customers, as he realised the importance of personal relationships with them and also to get direct feedback. In fact, those personal contacts were one of the reasons for his success. But as the company grew,

more layers of management came between Ram and his customers and the communication channels were closed. Ram did not notice this as he was busy with the development of new products, opening new showrooms, penetrating new market segments and concentrating on the growth and expansion of the company.

Ram was now relying on the reports of his executives to measure customer satisfaction and goodwill. Even though everything looked fine and rosy on the reports, a few old

customers with whom he was still in touch, told him that they definitely felt the quality of customer care had deteriorated. So Ram now wanted to develop a mechanism to directly interact with his customers, gain their feedback, share ideas, discuss how the business could be improved, and know what the customers wanted. He spoke to an IT consultant and the latter suggested creating a personal website. "But we already have a website!" exclaimed Ram. "How is this new site going to help?"

Do CEOs need a personal website?

In most cases companies have websites that give information about their products, dealers, showrooms, and so on. The websites also have contact information like customer care numbers, e-mail IDs and postal addresses. However, a company website is designed with the objective of information dissemination and, as such, will not help in eliciting quality customer feedback or facilitate customer interaction. If you look at the contact pages of most company websites, you will see e-mail addresses listed out for information, support, sales, etc. These impersonal e-mail IDs will not give customers a feeling that they are mailing a real person. So the first step to make the company website more personal is to give

the name of the people who handles the respective function. If instead of *info@orion.com* or *sales@orion.com* one can give *david@orion.com* or *sara@orion.com*, people will be more willing to send their comments. But that is a small step. Another thing to do is to enable the chat facility where the customer can interact in real-time with the customer care representative. But the best method is to provide toll free customer care numbers and have real professionals manage the calls.

managed properly, can improve customer satisfaction and goodwill, generate new product ideas, elicit valuable suggestions on improving the company's performance and, above all, create loyal customers who will act as brand ambassadors of the company.

By creating a personal website, CEOs are providing the customers the opportunity to contact them and this is something all customers like. The mistake most CEOs and top executives make is

The mistake most CEOs and top executives make is that they try to hide behind the organisation's website, making the task of contacting them nearly impossible.

But these steps, while making the company website more personal, will not solve the customers' need to interact with the top management in case of some grievance that could not be solved by the customer care department; or when they want to offer suggestions for improvements or new business ideas. This is where the personal website of the CEO comes in and if implemented and

that they try to hide behind the organisation's website, making the task of contacting them nearly impossible. In today's highly competitive environment, where you need innovative ideas and new mechanisms to succeed and stay ahead of competition, a well designed, developed, and managed CEO website can give you an edge.

Contact us

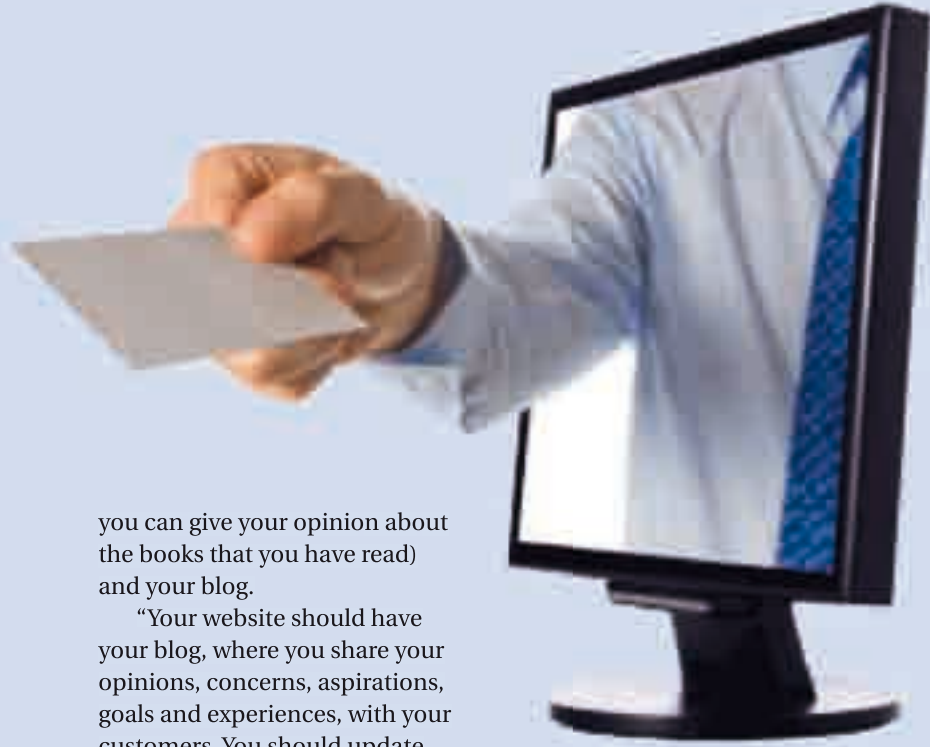
The screenshot shows a contact form with the following fields: Name (David Orion), Company (Orion Pvt Ltd), Email (david@orion.com), Message Subject, and Message. A 'Send' button is located at the bottom right of the form.

What should be the content of the CEO website?

Content is one of the things most CEOs find difficult. “What am I going to put on the website?” Ram asked the consultant. “You can project the human side of the organisation through your website,” answered the consultant.

He went on to add, “The contents of your website will depend on how much information you want to make public. But it should be more than what is available from other sources. If you are only going to provide information that is already available or that could be found easily, then your website will lose its charm.

“Some of the things that could be on your website are your contact information (e-mail or phone), resume (personal and professional), a few pictures, articles that



you can give your opinion about the books that you have read) and your blog.

“Your website should have your blog, where you share your opinions, concerns, aspirations, goals and experiences, with your customers. You should update it regularly; if not daily, a post a week or every fortnight would be really nice. A blog or weblog is a place where you can interact with your customers as they can post their comments, where you can seek feedback and they can

suggestions implemented, will be fiercely loyal and this will not only help in retaining customers but also in getting new ones as a recommendation from an existing customer is the best way to get more customers.

“You can also have a discussion forum, where the customers can post their queries, suggestions and comments about how your company is performing, how satisfied they are with your products and the ways by which you can improve your organisation. You will get more valuable insights and innovative product ideas from your customers than any other source. All these will provide opportunities to build a personal rapport with customers,” the consultant added.

The contents of your website will depend on how much information you want to make public. But it should be more than what is available from other sources.

you have written, books you have published, transcripts of speeches that you have made, your hobbies, material related to your hobbies (for example, if your hobby is photography, you can put up some of the photos that you have taken; if your hobby is reading, then

give advice, suggestions and create a sense of camaraderie that will go a long way in improving customer satisfaction. Customers who can give suggestions and offer comments about the products they want or have purchased, directly to the CEO, and can see their

How to build a website

"How will I build the website? I don't know anything about websites," Ram aired his worries. His consultant was able to reassure him, "Building a website is again a personal preference. You can ask a website design and development company to do that. You can ask your in-house experts (if you have them) to do it, or if you are interested, you can do it yourself."

"You can create a website from scratch or you can create it using one or a combination of the free open source software (FOSS) packages available. For example, you can ask some website developer to design and develop a site for you or you can create a site using free software like WordPress (www.wordpress.org), B2evolution (www.b2evolution.net), Nucleus (www.nucleuscms.org), phpBB (www.phpbb.com), YaaB (www.yabbforum.com), MercuryBoard (www.mercuryboard.com), etc.

"Whether it is a custom designed site or one created using FOSS, you will need the following before you can create the website: a domain name and a host for your website. The domain name again is a personal choice—you can have a domain in your name, it can be a sub-domain of your company website, or it can

be a name you like. If you choose an uncommon name or a name that is not related to your name or the organisation, it would be a good idea to explain why you have chosen the name. For example, if your hobby is photography and you have chosen your domain name as www.shutterbug.com, then you can explain why you have

You can create a website from scratch or you can create it using one or a combination of the free open source software (FOSS) packages available.

chosen that name, why you like photography, put up some good photographs you have taken, write a few articles about how to take good photographs, the cameras and lenses that you prefer and



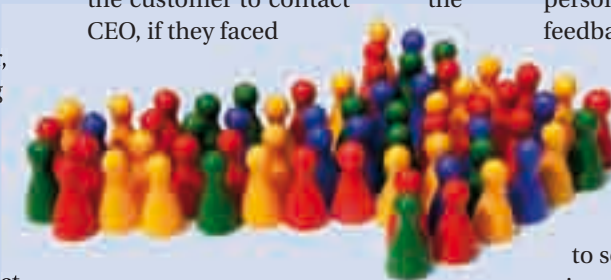
why, and so on. It will give your customers a glimpse of your personal interests and what you are passionate about in addition to business," the consultant added.

Irrespective of how you build the website, it should have a Web interface allowing you to manage your website using a Web browser. You should be able to post new articles, update the blog, upload new photos, add latest news, take part in discussions, answer mails, etc by using a Web browser. This feature will enable you to be in touch with your customers from anywhere in the world and update the contents whenever you like—all you need is a computer with an Internet connection.

How to let the customers know

So, you have created a website and are all set to interact with your customers. But how would the customers know that you have a website. In the case of Ram Kumar, CEO of Orion, he did the following things. First, he sent a mail to all existing customers informing them about his website and invited them to come, visit, interact and offer comments and suggestions. Next, he put a "Contact

the CEO" link on the company website that pointed to his website. Whenever a customer purchased an item, he/she would get a thank you letter asking the customer to contact the CEO, if they faced



any problems or if they had some suggestions, comments or just wanted to communicate with him. He also invited them to visit his personal website and give their feedback on the performance of the company and its employees.

So Ram used a combination of strategies to let the customers know about his website and also to ensure that he was available to solve their problems and grievances.



How to manage

One question Ram had in mind was how to manage the website replying to hundreds of e-mails, suggestions, grievances, comments, etc. How would he find time to update his blog, participate in the discussions, answer the queries and so on? Already he had a very busy schedule and if he was going to manage his website, then that would take up a large portion of his working time.

the success of the personal website will depend on the PA's performance. So recruit the best talent—a person with excellent communication skills, imagination, creativity, problem solving skills, who is a good diplomat, who can take decisions when required, and who can connect with people,” the consultant advised.

The main tasks of the PA are to act as a liaison between the customers and the CEO and also between the

Friday and have the responsibility of being the CEO's eyes and ears within the company and outside, regarding customer related issues. While the primary functions are to manage the website, answer and solve routine queries and problems, PAs have a bigger task to perform. There will be many cases where the CEO's personal intervention is required and his discretionary powers need to be used. In such cases, the PA should collect all the relevant information that will enable the CEO to make the decision and should be ready with the facts when he meets the CEO. The frequency of the CEO-PA meetings could be decided depending on the number of cases to be solved, queries to be answered, new information to be added, and so on. They should sit together and discuss matters at least once a week. The CEO can give the details of the contents to be updated, the blog posts to be published, etc. During the initial phases, the CEO should spend more time with the PA and once he gains experience and expertise, he can be given more freedom and authority so the number of problems that the CEO has to resolve will decrease. But each week, the PA should appraise the CEO regarding what has been done and what were the suggestions, ideas, and comments that the customers had sent and how they were resolved, so that the CEO is always aware of what is happening.

Since it is not possible for CEOs to single-handedly manage their personal websites, hiring a personal assistant to do the task can help.

The consultant told him that it was not possible for CEOs to single-handedly manage their personal websites. And they ought not to as the CEO has a lot of other jobs and responsibilities. His suggestion was to hire a personal assistant (PA) to do the task. “But great care should be taken while selecting the person as

employees and the CEO. The PA should screen the e-mails and take care of all the routine stuff like customer grievances or answering minor queries that could be solved without the CEO's involvement. This person should be given enough authority to interact with various departments for getting things done — be the CEO's man-

A stitch in time...

Rohan Verma*, a software professional and popular blogger bought two pairs of Lee jeans from an outlet of the Xanadu* apparel chain. Both the pairs were identical except for the colour. So he tried one and since it fitted well he didn't try the other one. But at home when he tried the second pair of jeans, it didn't fit as it was two sizes smaller, even though the label said both were of

the same size. So he took the smaller pair to the showroom and asked for the correct size. The salesperson told him that the colour he wanted was out of stock, but new stocks would arrive in a week. He assured Rohan that he would give him a call once the fresh stocks arrived and would replace them. But even after two weeks and three trips to the showroom, Rohan couldn't get the item replaced. Angry and frustrated, he asked to see the store manager and after waiting



for about an hour, met him. When Rohan apprised the manager of his problem, the latter asked him to wait till stocks arrived, but was not willing to give a firm commitment on the date. But Rohan didn't want to wait anymore and asked for a refund. The manager refused. When Rohan said that he would sue them, the manager retorted, "I don't give a damn. Go ahead; you won't be able to prove anything." But the entire conversation was being recorded on Rohan's mobile phone.

However, Rohan didn't go to the consumer court. He checked the company's website where in the "About Us" section there was an excellent write-up about how the company was started, the company values and how with sheer dedication and the generous support of the customers, David Bhandari* (the CEO) built the company from scratch and made it big. He searched the website

for the e-mail ID or any other contact information of the CEO, but all that was available were two images of him receiving the "Young Entrepreneur" and "Innovative CEO" awards.

Rohan wrote a damaging post about his experience on his blog with graphic and detailed discussion of the events along with the recording of the manager saying "I don't give a damn...." He implored his readers not to get cheated and suggested many good stores where he received excellent service.

Within a few days, the story spread (thanks to the Internet) and soon the number of customers began dwindling in all the showrooms of Xanadu. There was nothing wrong with the stores, but the main consumers—the young professionals—were miffed by the treatment given to one of them and started avoiding the shop. So what started as a small incident in a single

showroom became a nationwide "Quit Xanadu" campaign and the sales dipped, revenues plummeted and things began to look very bleak. Then CEO David Bhandari had to approach Rohan, apologise to him, refund the money, and offer a public apology on Rohan's blog for the unprofessional behaviour of his manager. Even after all these efforts, the sales didn't get back to the previous high as the other stores used this opportunity to woo the unsatisfied Xanadu customers and kept them happy by offering them discounts and freebies.

If David Bhandari had put up his contact information or had a website through which Rohan could contact him, the problem would have been solved and the business would not have suffered. This example shows the power and speed of the Internet in disseminating information and the pitfalls of not using the facilities offered by the Internet.

Customer intelligence is a competitive weapon

Irene Mathews* is the owner of Braintree Books*. She has bookstores in all major cities in the country. She regularly interacts with her customers through her website. Whenever a customer purchases a book from a Braintree outlet, the customer is given an ID card. The customer has to provide details like name, address and e-mail. All the information is stored in a central database. So an existing customer could walk into any Braintree showroom, show the ID card and get discounts depending on the total value of purchases.

One day a regular customer complained that the discounts she got was something that she could get at any bookstore if she bargained properly. She wanted something

more. Irene wrote a post about this in her blog and asked the customers for their suggestions. Based on the customer suggestions, she soon came out with a loyalty programme. Based on the value of purchases (since all the purchases made with the ID card was stored in a central database, Irene was in a position to know the purchase history of each and every customer) she gave out new ID cards—Platinum, Titanium, Gold, Silver and Basic. All the existing customers got the preferred cards based on the collective value of their purchases. New customers would start at the basic level and as and when the purchases reached the specified amounts, the category would be changed and the customer would be issued a new card indicating the preferred status. This was a huge success, with customers making all their purchases from Braintree as the discounts for the preferred customers were very attractive. So even though Irene had to pay out better discounts, free gifts, and other loyalty rewards,

the revenue increased and soon she had thousands of loyal customers who wouldn't buy books from any other shop.

She got many other ideas from her customers, like starting a Book Club, bookshops in hotels and airports, and starting an on-line portal. In order to improve employee efficiency and quality of service, Irene introduced an on-line poll where her customers could vote for their favourite employees. Based on the customers' feedback she would reward the most popular and dedicated employees. This scheme helped in improving the quality of service and productivity of the employees as they knew their actions—both good and bad—will be known and reviewed.

Irene attributes her success to her personal website and the participation and support of her customers and their ideas. Her customers are also happy as they get fantastic discounts, rewards, great service and have access to the owner.



Innovate with the help of customers

Ramaswamy Iyer* is the owner of a highly successful fast food chain in the country—Copper Chimney*. His restaurants serve typical South Indian food. The restaurants are very hygienic, offer high quality and tasty food at affordable rates. An excellent cook, Ramaswamy started

a website with the basic intention of sharing his recipes with others. But soon he began interacting with the customers and once he became aware of the power of the Internet, he redesigned his website to include his blog and a discussion forum. On the blog he posted his ideas, plans, and philosophy of doing business along with new recipes and tips on cooking. On the discussion forum the topics of discussion included what could be done to improve the quality of service and what other services the customers wanted.

It was in one such discussion, that a customer suggested starting an on-line food portal, where the customers could book party orders, order daily lunch from the office and the like. Another suggestion was to start a section for sweets so that they don't have to go to another shop for them. Soon Ramaswamy implemented all these ideas and now his food portal handles bookings at

his restaurants, takes party orders, delivers corporate lunches for people who have signed up for that facility, and so on. Any customer could e-mail him with suggestions and complaints and he would reply or, if required, call them back. The customers are fiercely loyal and they bring in a lot of new ones and the business is booming. Though many other restaurant owners tried starting their personal websites, they failed in winning over customers as their endeavour lacked the genuine intention of connecting and interacting with customers, and were poor imitations of Ramaswamy's site. "You need to spend a lot of time and effort, at least during the initial stages, to get the customers talking to you. If you don't have a genuine interest, then don't create a personal website, as it will only backfire with customers (who do not get a response after being promised one), getting more dissatisfied and angry," says Ramswamy.



Whom does a personal website suit best?

We have seen a few cases where the CEOs have successfully used their personal websites to take their organisations forward. We know that all the CEOs cannot create and manage their own websites. Do all CEOs need a personal website? The answer is 'No'. It is not required for small businesses as in most cases the CEO or the top management will be interacting with the customers. But today's small businesses will grow and it is always a good idea to have the necessary infrastructure like customer databases, preferences, etc, in place so that the CEOs can have their website as and when the need arises.

A personal website is not a viable option in the case of large organisations as the CEOs will find it difficult to manage it effectively. When the CEO does not have a personal website, the next best thing is a company blog, where the employees including the CEO can post articles that share information about new products, new businesses, business plans, and so on. This will give a chance to customers to interact with the top brass, at least on a limited scale.

Personal websites are ideal for CEOs of medium-sized companies. These companies have a large number of customers making it impossible for the CEO to personally attend to the needs of each. Yet, they are not large enough and the nature of business does not

necessitate a full-fledged customer care department. Take the case of Orion, which has eight showrooms and a customer base of around 4000; the case of the Xanadu apparel chain with its 24 outlets and more than 10,000 customers; Ramaswamy's Copper Chimney that has 35 outlets and an on-line portal with a customer base of 20,000 or Braintree's chain of bookstores, which also has an on-line store, where the number of customers is more than 25,000. In all the above cases, the number of regular customers would not be more than 30-40 per cent of the total customer base. Also, if the employees are properly trained in dealing politely and diplomatically with the customers, the number of customer care issues would be very less. But in all the above cases, it is good for the CEO to interact with the customers to get feedback, comments, suggestions, new business ideas, and to solve their problems. A personal website is the ideal medium for that.

Personal websites are ideal for CEOs of medium-sized companies as it makes it possible for them to personally attend to the needs of customers.

What will CEOs of larger organisations do?

The primary aim of a CEO website is to enable the CEOs to have direct contact with the customers. But in the case of large organisations, this might be a tough task. Asking the customers to contact you and then not responding to their queries, grievances and suggestions will be more damaging. So in the case of large companies, the better option is to have an excellent customer service department and bring it under the direct control of the CEO. There

marketing and customer care. The performance of these departments—how they treat the customers, how efficient and effective they are in solving customers' problems and what impression they create, will decide the amount of customer satisfaction and customer goodwill the company will generate. So these two departments should be staffed with people with good communication skills, who are diplomatic, good natured, pleasant and have the aptitude



An excellent, efficient and responsive customer care department is one of the greatest assets of an organisation and plays a vital role in improving customer satisfaction and goodwill.

should be mechanisms to ensure that the CEO or someone from the top management is always available to solve the issues before it gets out of hand. An excellent, efficient and responsive customer care department is one of the greatest assets of an organisation and plays a vital role in improving customer satisfaction and goodwill.

The two departments in any organisation that directly interact with the customers are sales/

and willingness to serve and assist the customer in making the best purchasing decisions and then solving their problems, if any. These two departments should ideally report to the CEOs so that they can get the feedback and have their finger on the pulse of the market and closely connect with customers. Irrespective of whether or not the CEOs have a personal website, they should be involved with customer facing departments.



Gandhigiri

“A customer is the most important visitor on our premises. He is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interruption in our work. He is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider in our business. He is part of it. We are not doing him a favour by serving him. He is doing us a favour by giving us an opportunity to do so.”

— Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhiji's words are more important today as customers have more choices and options. Today, the customer is the king and customer satisfaction, goodwill, and loyalty are the critical factors that decide the success of any organisation. Having a good rapport and connection with the customers; interacting and getting feedback on the company's performance, suggestions for improvement, and new business ideas; solving their problems, among others, are the factors that separate the leaders from the rest. A properly maintained and managed personal website of the CEO is an excellent tool for achieving customer participation and ensuring satisfaction.

**All names of people and organisations have been changed for purposes of privacy*

Alexis Leon

The author is the managing director of L and L Consultancy Services Pvt Ltd. He has written more than 40 books on computing, IT and management topics. He has worked with companies like Pond's India Ltd and Tata Consultancy Services. He holds a master's degree (M. Tech) in Industrial Engineering. He can be reached through his website at <http://www.alexisleon.com/>.