

The Growth of Industry Web Portals: Framework and Guidelines

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a growth framework for industry web portals which present a new opportunity in the Internet business. The proposed framework contains five stages: business plan stage, website development stage, attraction stage, entrenchment stage, and defense stage. The actions to be taken and strategies to be applied in each stage are set out. Two industry web portals are investigated in detail. The two examples illustrate the applicability of the proposed growth framework to the real world. The combination of a conceptual growth framework and the application of this conceptual framework to two real world examples yields a set of guidelines based in large part on lessons learned from the two examples. Thus, this paper provides a concept-based growth framework and a set of real world-based guidelines that will very possibly provide a practical benefit to industry web portal business practitioners.

Keywords: Industry Web Portal, Online Community, Virtual Community, Web Portal Management

INTRODUCTION

As the Internet has developed, the large general-purpose web portals, like Yahoo, MSN, Sina, etc., have dominated the market place. Therefore, it is extremely challenging for new entrants to penetrate

the general web portals segment. On the other hand, taking into consideration the evidence of the emergence of professional virtual communities (Arinze, 2012; Chen & Hung, 2010; Franchi et al., 2013; Yu et al. 2009), professionals in different industries or specialized areas seem willing to utilize

DOI: 10.4018/ijec.2014100102

virtual platforms for information exchange and social support. Thus, industry or specialized web portals present an excellent opportunity. We will use the term industry web portals to refer to industry web portals, specialized web portals, and professional-specific web portals.

The major differences between general web portals and industry web portals involve the content and the users. An industry web portal's content is about the specific industry, which may include news, knowledge, recruitment information, and various virtual sub-communities. The visitors of an industry web portal are individuals working in the industry, people working in a related industries, and others seeking job opportunities in respective business segments. Visitors come to an industry web portal for diverse purposes which may include individuals looking for news and jobs, learning new knowledge, seeking friendship and support, sharing knowledge, experiences, opinions, and ideas, and looking for co-creation of new knowledge, new products, and new services.

How does an industry web portal grow and evolve? What approaches and strategies should an industry web portal use to succeed? Little research addresses these issues which are quite important to practitioners. This paper aims to benefit web practitioners by narrowing this gap through the development of a web portal growth framework and set of practical guidelines that result from the thoughtful application of the growth framework to two real world cases.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Damsgaad (2002) presents a portal life cycle model for web portal management. The life cycle model contains four phases: attraction phase, contagion phase, entrenchment phase, and defense phase, in which practitioners at each phase face the necessity to overcome certain challenges to advance to the next phase. The attraction phase of a web portal begins from the launching of the web portal with some unique/innovative features that existing web portals do not provide. The primary objectives of practitioners in the attraction stage of the process involve on attracting visitors and keeping them coming back to the portal, with eventually visitors becoming recurring users. Practitioners in the contagion phase seek to "infect" the recurring users so that they can help spread the portal. Practitioners find themselves in the entrenchment phase comes when the number of users of the portal reaches a "critical mass". The web portal at this phase can then "tax" users by providing upgraded/enhanced services and accepting advertisements. Once the portal is well established, practitioners then must defend the successful position they have achieved by carefully monitoring the challenges from new entrants. The primary goal of these practitioners in each of these four phases is to "lock-in" users, so that they do not switch to competitors (Damsgaad, 2002).

A relevant research area of industry web portals is virtual (online) communities which have been widely discussed in the information systems discipline (Johnson et

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