

Cast a Wider Web with Widgets

New Site Components Leverage Social Networks for Cost Effective Marketing

By Jon Leland

Imagine being able to update potential customers with valuable, highly visual information by creating one interactive module that is then instantly updated into any number of other websites, reaching thousands, even millions of potential customers.

On today's Web, companies can connect with customers through innovative channels like blogs and email newsletters, but they are also finding value in marketing via social networking platforms like Facebook and MySpace. While some companies purchase advertising on these sites, there is a new, more interactive method to capture the attention these targeted virtual communities: widgets.

A widget is an interactive website component that can be posted into any web page using an embed code, a snippet of HTML. Widgets may contain various forms of multimedia and information, and can be easily updated and shared. For example, YouTube videos are frequently displayed on millions of other websites simply by embedding the HTML code for that video in a web page or blog post. A viewer can then play the referenced video instantly, without having to visit YouTube.com.

Going to the next level, for example, the [NBA's website](http://www.nba.com) (<http://www.nba.com>) is making use of multimedia widgets that allow any fan's website to display the NBA Playoffs' tournament brackets on their website, blog or MySpace page.

For small businesses, new programs have recently been released that simplify the widget creation process. Almost all are web-based applications that are easily accessed by a web browser (like Internet Explorer or Firefox). For example, Adobe's new [Photoshop Express](http://www.photoshop.com/express) (<http://www.photoshop.com/express>), allows you to edit your photos using a free, online version of Adobe's popular image editing software; and it also includes the capability to compile photos into slideshows that include embed codes. This last feature lets you extend the reach of your image slide show by enabling it to be posted to your website and any other website with which you choose to share your pictures.

Another, even more versatile widget creation tool is [Sprout Builder](http://www.sproutbuilder.com/) (<http://www.sproutbuilder.com/>), a new, web-based software that can compile virtually any type of media— videos, text, photos, and music — into interactive Flash widgets that can also be embedded into any web page, blog post or social networking page. Sprouts, as the Sprout Builder's output files are called, also include "Share" links (think

YouTube videos) so that they can be spread “virally.” These widgets can be attractive and eye-catching with custom designed backgrounds and sophisticated interactivity.

The key to success is the widget’s ability to share and spread your information for you. Word-of-mouth marketing has always been one of the most powerful ways to market, and a well-produced and valuable widget can give any business the opportunity to get people talking. Breakthrough hits will happen when a well-known and popular blog writer likes your widget and decides to share it on his site where thousands of readers may see it on any given day.

Using a widget in conjunction with social networking and/or an active blog can catch the attention of many viewers who, in turn, can help your information spread quickly and seamlessly. By spreading virally in their own right, widgets have already become remarkable marketing vehicles that can help any leading edge company to create a far more dynamic Web presence.

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