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Posted on: Friday, 6 January 2006, 06:00 CST

Consumer Connection

By Dan Sewell

The site promises "simple solutions for easy living," offering tips on dinners, decorating, cleaning and organizing your home. After planning out your housework, you can download music from a theme playlist -- prepare dinner, for example, to such songs as Duran Duran's "Hungry Like The Wolf" and k.d. lang's "Diet of Strange Places."

For fun, there are amusing family anecdotes from comedian Rajiv Satyal and a continuous scroll of factoids such as "cold water is heavier than hot water" and "chocolate does not cause acne." Eventually, you get to the promotions -- discounts, coupons and other come-ons for such Procter & Gamble Co. products as Swiffer dusters and Dawn dishwashing liquid. But the site is more magazine than advertising blitz.

"Our strategy is not to be all about the brand -- it's really about her (the consumer) and the stuff she wants to know about," said Maurice Coffey, marketing director for Home Made Simple. "It's really trying to figure out how to integrate content that they enjoy getting and how to soft-sell and make it relevant, so if they're looking for an article on spring cleaning, it makes sense to suggest some products to use."

Many businesses are venturing beyond the early model of company Web sites heavy on product promotion and coupons.

"It's a major trend and it's a moving trend," said Gary Stibel, a marketing analyst who heads the New England Consulting Group. "This has been going on for years; the major advertisers are just understanding better how to execute. Most companies are still doing very poorly because they are far too blatant in promotion of their own brands."

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Since its launch about five years ago, P&G's homemadesimple.com site has grown from 300,000 subscribers for its free monthly e-mail newsletter to a projected 10 million in 2006. It's among seven sites linked from the Cincinnati-based company's main site that combine information aimed at the target markets for its varied consumer products, such as "Health Expressions," with advice and resources on wellness and treatment, and "Being Girl," with forums and guidance on youth topics and answers to questions about puberty and menstrual cycles.

It's a sign of the times that the company that pioneered radio and television soap operas is focusing on newer ways to connect with its customers amid sweeping changes in how people get their information, and growing competition for their attention.

"As marketers, we're all realizing that establishing that relationship with a consumer is important, but how do we keep that relationship with her when she's being bombarded with all these other messages?" said Coffey. "We quickly found it wasn't good enough just to have a storefront."

Some companies emphasize useful online information and resources. Swiss-based Nestle SA, the world's largest food company, has online magazines about child care, nutrition and other areas in which it has products, while Cincinnati-based Kroger Co. has health and medicine resources and a plethora of recipes.

Other approaches focus on entertainment. Coca-Cola Co.'s CokeMusic site has let participants hear new music, create their own music mixes and go virtual clubbing, while Anheuser-Busch Inc.'s Budweiser site has new music and movie trailers as well as humorous beer commercials.

Interactive games and competitions are also drawing cards.

American Express Co. made a big splash in 2004 with two "webisodes" -- online video stories about five minutes long with comedian Jerry Seinfeld and his pal, Superman.

"You're really coming for entertainment, and we did find that many people visited the site and stayed quite awhile," company spokeswoman Judy Tenzer said. The company's site received 3 million visitors "in a fairly short time," she said.

Coffey said P&G is considering other ways to expand the reach of Home Made Simple, which in December began offering music downloads. A television show and a magazine are among the possibilities.

Meanwhile, companies still use traditional forms of advertising, such as Burger King's high-profile new television commercials around its tie-in with the movie "King Kong." "At the end of the day, we still have a goal to get our message out there quickly to our core consumers, and television is still far and away the primary vehicle," said Gillian Smith, the fast-food chain's senior director of media and interactive.

"It's not an either-or," said Stibel. "Broadcast does an exceptional job of carpet-bombing and interactive is efficient and does an excellent job of site-bombing. It is the combination that wins the war."

Text of fax box follows:

In the works

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Source: Cincinnati Post

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