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22 tips to turn anxious web browsers into confident software buyers

by [Sue Anderson](#), Reporter, **SoftwareCEO**

Here's a question nearly every software marketing exec struggles with: How do you balance what you *give* to your website visitors, versus what you *get* from them in return?

In other words, how much does a software business need to give away before asking a prospect for their name, e-mail, phone number, and more?

From the seller's perspective, you want to capture as much information — as soon as possible — so that your auto responders and sales team can get busy.

Software buyers know this, so they're reluctant to give out *any* contact information, until they've put you on their short list of potential vendors.

So how do you strike the right balance?

To answer this question, SoftwareCEO sat down with two veteran software marketing experts:

- Judy Schramm, president of software marketing firm [JMR Consulting](#) and a [SoftwareCEO Marketing Forum moderator](#), and
- Susan Tatum, president/CMO of [Tatum Marketing](#) and a recent [Software University presenter](#).

Both offered their advice and recommendations on how to handle this delicate online dance, in these 22 tips.

Browser-to-buyer tip #1: Understand that prospects are inherently anxious about your software

"One reason buyers are anxious is because the software purchase itself is a visible risk," says Tatum.

If they select the right product, the buyer is hailed as a company hero. But if they make a bad decision, that can hurt the buyer's reputation or job prospects.

Tatum says software marketers will serve web visitors well if they address their product anxiety on two levels:

Software product anxiety #1. Will this software solve my problem?

Software product anxiety #2. What makes this software better than the rest?

Browser-to-buyer tip #2: Buyers are anxious about you, too

Beyond basic product questions, Tatum says prospects come to your site with a general anxiety about you and your company, with concerns like:

- Does your product do what you promise?
- What are you going to do with my contact information?
- Will you provide adequate tech support?
- Will you still be around in a few years?

Schramm concurs. She says that tracking website behavior for her long-standing clients reveals that new visitors start by reviewing product pages. Then they look at the company information, and finally, they check out who else is listed as customers.

"You need to devote effort to building credibility," Schramm says. Put everything you can on your website that demonstrates you're a stable, reputable company.

For example, give visitors an overview of your tech support process.

Provide your company contact information. Don't go asking web visitors for all their contact details if you, yourself, aren't willing to post more than an e-mail address.

Finally, don't forget your privacy policy. A website without a privacy policy that's easy to find is a big red flag to first-time visitors.

Browser-to-buyer tip #3: To ease buyer anxiety, s-l-o-w d-o-w-n

Tatum and Schramm both agree: Many software companies try to skip ahead too fast in the sales process, pushing new visitors too quickly towards the "Buy now" page.

"Don't treat your website like a muscle car that can take your visitors from zero to 60 with just one visit," says Schramm.

Unless you're selling a downloadable B2C product for just a few dollars, you need to take time to nurture the software sale.

Give your website visitors information to answer their concerns, so they can decide for themselves if your product fits their needs.

After all, you don't want prospects to buy your software by mistake and end up unhappy. Do you?

Browser-to-buyer tip #4: Eliminate website distractions

"One thing I commonly see," says Tatum, "is that the home page is designed from a graphic

school of interruption marketing. They think they have to grab someone's attention with billboards and graphics."

You don't need to do that.

Visitors who come to your website don't need to be entertained. They're already interested.

But remember, you have only two to seven seconds to engage a new visitor. Don't waste it with flashy graphics and animation that takes their focus away from the real reason why they came to visit.

Browser-to-buyer tip #5: Drive your PPC traffic to optimized landing pages

Sending pay-per-click (PPC) traffic to your home page is a sure-fire way to distract your visitors.

If an online searcher clicks on a link for "reseller kit," don't send them to your home page where they'll have to search all over again for what they want.

Remember, you have seven seconds to engage a visitor. Do it, by taking them immediately to a landing page that's optimized for each of your campaigns. Give visitors what they came for.

Browser-to-buyer tip #6: Customize landing pages to suit software buyers at different stages

"Don't try to have a one-size-fits-all situation," says Schramm.

People will find you at different stages of their buying process. It's your job to keep them moving along, by offering materials that answer their questions at that point in time.

"Early in the process, they're out there looking for information. All they know is: They have a problem, and it's now serious enough to take action," she says.

"You want to turn up when they're initially searching online using problem-oriented keyword phrases...

"Then when they do their research...

"And then, when they look for software solutions.

"You want them bumping up on your website throughout the entire process," says Schramm.

Break down your sales process into separate stages, and create separate campaigns (with custom landing pages, right?) for each stage.

This way, your prospects will continually be reminded of your company, and your solution.

Browser-to-buyer tip #7: If you have to choose, go with problem-solving, an online demo, and customer stories

Offering a smorgasbord of white papers, brochures, demos, case studies, and all sorts of other product literature can help attract prospects.

But if you're just starting out — or on a really tight budget — Schramm and Tatum say there are three must-haves your website needs to offer:

Website must-have #1: An explanation of how your software product solves their problem

Remember, first-time visitors will be most anxious about your product.

Make sure you offer literature that helps them understand how your software solves their problem, and specifically, what makes your product better than the rest.

Website must-have #2: Online demo

"A brief, three-to-five minute demo is absolutely essential," says Schramm. "Give the high points of the product. Show what you solve, and how you solve it."

Website must-have #3: Customer success stories

Testimonials, case studies, and success stories demonstrate how others have achieved success with your product.

But testimonials should name names. The client and their company needs to go on record for the testimonial to have any value.

Schramm suggests that added details like the person's name, company size, location, and quantified results further boost the testimonial's value.

Browser-to-buyer tip #8: Let your customers speak to each other

Tatum recommends that software marketers consider opening up their website to customers.

"I'm not suggesting this is the first thing you should do, but with Web 2.0, you can really start to build up an online community. And third-party research has shown that technology buyers want this sort of information."

Blogs can be a simple and effective first step towards community-building. Get your customers engaged and contributing to your blog.

Once the conversation picks up steam, you can consider upgrading to an online discussion forum.

Browser-to-buyer tip #9: Show your visitors who's behind your company

Second to product information, website visitors want to get to know your company.

The lesson? Don't skimp on these pages: Your web visitors *are* watching!

"People want to understand the philosophy of the company, and why you're doing what you're doing," says Tatum.

Unfortunately, most "About Us" sections are really dry, which Tatum believes is a missed opportunity. She recommends clients show the human side of the company, by adding depth to these pages.

"Management bios, photos, and timetables are all good stuff to include," Tatum says.

Schramm encourages her clients to post [YouTube](#)-style videos on their site.

"What we're finding is that it adds another dimension," she says. "It's like the quote in a press release. Video lets you put your spin into it, adding depth and an informality that's just not available otherwise."

If video is a little outside your comfort zone, why not start with a personal letter that talks about your CEO's passion for the industry?

People are reluctant to do business with people they don't know. An "About Us" section sprinkled with personality will speak volumes to web visitors.

Need more suggestions on how to spice up your site with video? Keep reading.

Browser-to-buyer tip #10: Videos and podcasts may — or may not — be worth the investment

Schramm and Tatum differ slightly on the value of videos and podcasts.

Tatum believes they're coming along, but she's not seeing evidence that they're worthwhile, yet.

"Videos and podcasts still rank low on what prospects look for. I would expect the younger generation will change this. For now, if you want to use them, I recommend you offer them as an option."

Schramm has already stepped into the video era, using them to add personality to company backgrounder pages.

But what should people talk about in these videos?

"Just think about what you'd say if you could talk to your visitors," she says. Don't worry if they look like home movies. Just keep them short, no more than 10 minutes.

Still at a loss for topics? Here's three to get you started:

Web video topic # 1. Interview your product manager about your newest software release.

Web video topic #2. Interview your CEO about where they see the industry going.

Web video topic #3. Personalize your management bios, by having each person introduce themselves to your visitors.

One last tip: Don't forget to transcribe your video content, and post the transcripts on your site, so it's accessible to search engine spiders and the hearing-impaired.

Browser-to-buyer tip #11: Show visitors that your company is going places

Tatum says web visitors also want to see that you're progressing and growing as a company.

Use a press release archive to document your company history. Key achievements, new product versions, major deals, new hires, and partnerships all demonstrate where the company has been, and where it's headed.

And there's no need to remove your older press releases from years ago. Keep them on your site, behind a link for that year.

Browser-to-buyer tip #12: Offer content that helps buyers evaluate their purchasing options

Some people want to talk to a sales person early on. Others don't want to talk to a sales person until much later.

Cater to the second crowd by offering tools and templates that educate them on your strengths, and make it easier for them to qualify their alternatives.

Schramm says one of her clients is having great success with an RFP template.

"Of course it's geared towards my client's offering, but we've found that many people use this template as the basis for their RFP. We see this checklist being used again and again."

This kind of checklist can be packaged as a standalone document, or placed at the end of a white paper that explains each feature in terms that put competitors on the defensive.

Browser-to-buyer tip #13: Address pricing at some level, then test visitors' reactions

Tatum says you don't have to reveal actual pricing on your site. But you probably should give visitors a general idea.

"What a prospect wants to know is: 'Am I wasting my time because this solution is too expensive?'" she says.

There are some ways to come at this sideways.

"Talk about ROI, speed, and how quickly it will be paid off. Then, test. Compare results from a landing page with no pricing information whatsoever," Tatum says, "to one that contains information about how pricing is arrived at."

This will show you which approach your visitors prefer.

Schramm agrees. "Pricing information on your site will give you a lot of credibility, even if you only explain where it starts and how it works.

"With high-ticket sales, it can be harder to do," she says. "But it still helps, because it gives prospects a greater comfort level, and it saves your sales reps time and effort."

You don't want to waste time with prospects who couldn't possibly afford your solution. So showing some type of pricing will keep tire kickers out of your hair.

Browser-to-buyer tip #14: Cater to early-stage prospects with no-strings-attached content

After you've addressed buyer anxiety, you need to decide what collateral you give out no-strings-attached, versus what you give in exchange for contact information.

"The reality is, every string is a barrier. In a perfect world," says Tatum, "it should all be no strings. Our websites should be *so* good, people just keep coming back on their own."

One thing for sure. There should be absolutely no strings on any product and company information, she says.

"It's to a seller's advantage to make case studies and testimonials free, too. Don't hide them behind a barrier."

Schramm's general rule is: Anything of value to people in the early stage of the sales process should have no strings.

What falls into this category?

Things like ROI worksheets, RFP templates, feature lists, information that explains how to implement the product successfully, and checklists that compares critical features between market leaders.

Browser-to-buyer tip #15: To identify what content should be "strings attached" ask yourself "Who benefits the most?"

A simple way to determine what's "no strings" versus "strings" is to ask yourself: "Who does this material help more? Me, or my prospects?"

If the answer is "me," then your material should be string-free.

"Traditionally, people are used to giving up their contact information for white papers," says Tatum, "but if the software company gets a greater value from the white paper, then I recommend you make it readily available."

Browser-to-buyer tip #16: When collecting contact info, don't go overboard

Once you've defined the content you want to collect contact information for, don't go crazy with forms that ask for a ton of information.

Tatum says, "Be happy with an e-mail address and first name."

Schramm prefers to collect a little more: first and last name, e-mail address, plus organization, and phone number.

"That let's us get in touch in two different ways, so we can do some preliminary screening," she says. "It varies by industry, though. Software developers are the most reluctant group I've seen.

"People who are higher up in companies are reluctant to provide information, too... unless you are upfront about what you're going to send them, and they're convinced of the value."

In all cases, only ask for the information you're really going to use. Do you really need that fax number? If not, drop it from your contact form.

Browser-to-buyer tip #17: Be upfront about what you're going to do with their contact information

There's other big faux-pas both Schramm and Tatum see with company websites: Most don't explain what's going to happen when a visitor provides their contact info.

"People want to know," says Tatum, "'Will you sell it?' or 'Are you going to bug me?'"

Tell them what to expect, and stay true to this promise.

One final thought: Give your buyers more control of this process, with an option on your contact form which lets people choose how they should be contacted (e.g. e-mail or phone call).

And maybe let them choose whether they want to get every company update, or only special offers, or useful information like white papers.

Browser-to-buyer tip #18: Sell the value of what prospects will get

Even the most seasoned software marketers sometimes forget to sell the value of the content they're trading for contact information.

So always be explicit on your signup pages.

"If you're offering a 10-part course by auto responder that teaches prospects one tip/trend/technique per day, tell them," says Schramm. "It's a lot easier to get people to sign up for this, rather than 'general product updates.'"

This fits in with our earlier tip about slowing down.

Sell the intermediate steps of the process — the useful information they will see, the helpful advice they will get — and not just the end goal buying your software.

Browser-to-buyer tip #19: Once you have their contact information, don't inundate them

With contact details in hand, don't lean too heavily on that delicate balance.

Focus first on educational literature. Tatum likes to start with some kind of report: a white paper, executive summary, or tip sheet.

Then she'll progress to literature that describes specifically how Acme Software is solving this problem.

After you've piqued a prospect's interest, invite them to something like a webinar. This presents another opportunity for you to help them and in return, to collect a little more contact information.

Browser-to-buyer tip #20: Always track two metrics: bounce rate and conversion rate

After your landing pages are created, and your PPC campaign is active, it's time to start monitoring your results.

First of all, keep an eye on your bounce rate, says Tatum. A "bounce" is a visitor who lands on one page of your site, but never goes to another.

If people come to your landing page and exit within 15 to 20 seconds, they're basically saying, "This isn't what I wanted."

What's a good rule of thumb for a bounce rate?

In general, Tatum suggests you should shoot for a bounce rate of 50 percent. For PPC, she says the bounce rate can go as high as 80 percent without much concern. That means one out of five visitors troll around your site to some extent.

Any higher bounce rate suggests a disconnect between your site and its visitors. You're either attracting the wrong visitors, or your web page needs improvements to its design or content.

The second metric Tatum says to monitor is your conversion rate — out of all your visitors, how many people gave you their contact info.

"Twenty percent is what you want to shoot for, but every company is different, and everybody's conversion rate can be better," she says.

"But often times, it's less expensive to correct conversion, than it is to drive more traffic."

How can you up your conversion rate? See the next tip.

Browser-to-buyer tip #21: Don't overlook the little things

Little adjustments on your site can add up to big improvements. Little things, like these four:

Quick Fix #1: Nix all Reset buttons

Purge your site of Reset buttons that clear out web forms. You don't need them, and having them risks aggravating visitors who click on them by accident.

For a longer discussion of this issue, [here's an article by usability expert Jacob Neilson](#).

Quick Fix #2: Pep up your landing page verbiage

Think action, action, action. A button that says "E-mail me my white paper now" is way stronger than "Click here to submit my request."

Think "What's In It For Me?" from your visitor's point of view. And use the most direct, muscular language you possibly can for all action steps.

Quick Fix #3: Add brief privacy reminders

Remember that all-important privacy policy?

Include a brief one- or two-sentence privacy reminder — with a link to your full privacy policy page — near the Submit button on your forms.

This reassures anxious visitors and repeats your promise about how you handle their contact info.

And for tips on designing an effective privacy policy, site members can download the article "[Six Critical Things You Need to Know about Website Privacy Policies](#)" from our Downloads Library.

Quick Fix #4: One call to action, please

Tatum recalls one client who had four competing calls to action — take a demo, sign up for our newsletter, etc. — all on the same web page.

She recommended they pick one, and pull the others off.

Conversions, she says, immediately doubled.

The lesson here: You need to clearly tell visitors what to do next, not point them off in all directions at once.

Browser-to-buyer tip #22: In the end, it's a matter of trust

There's three things in all, Schramm says, that your company needs to demonstrate to your web visitors:

- Credibility
- Value
- Trust

First comes credibility.

"Your customers need to see that your company is credible, which you accomplish with such things as a privacy policy and pricing information on your website."

Your client list, customer stories, positive mentions of you in the press, and the experience of your management team all build credibility.

Then, value.

"You need to provide real value in exchange for their contact information." That means useful information that will help your prospects do their jobs or understand some nagging problem better.

"Trust will come," says Schramm "after the first two are proven."

And when it does, and you've helped your web visitors to put aside their anxiety, the sales will flow in.