

E-Commerce: How can it work for me?

For the last few years, we have been drowning in headlines of gloom and doom regarding business on the Internet. And some of the doom has been justified. But as usual, many of those who experienced the doom also helped to create it. In the rush to enter the brave new world of Internet business, fundamental business practices were thrown to the wind as venture capitalists threw money into the void and were dragged in after it. Now, as evolution in the Internet continues, we are finding that businesses who recognized it for what it is are holding their own, even turning a profit. What did these businesses know that no one else seemed to recognize? **That the Internet is simply another channel that they can use to market and promote their products and services.** Knowing this, they also understand that most of the basic business principles still apply to this new world. They have a few quirks, admittedly. Mostly, businesses now have to work harder than ever to seek out the customer, get to know him and satisfy him. And it isn't easy.

Getting new customers is one of the biggest expenses any business can face. Again, this is nothing new in business. Most of the profit your business will see is from the return customer because sales to first-time customers are almost always absorbed by the advertising and marketing cost of getting to him in the first place. **Return customers are essential to profitability.**

The good news is that the cost of getting that new customer is going down. Why? Because Internet businesses are returning to the basics of advertising and marketing. Primarily **target marketing**. According to a survey of online e-tailers by Shop.org and The Boston Consulting Group (BCG), average customer acquisition costs dropped from \$40 in the second quarter of business, 2000, to \$20 in the third quarter as online retailers focused on target marketing instead of expensive mass-market advertising campaigns. Businesses who use other marketing channels (catalogs, brick and mortar stores) have the least expense in new customer acquisition.

How does this translate to your marketing budget? As of second quarter 2000, 61% of the marketing budget for online businesses was spent on customer acquisition. This is an increase from 52% in fourth quarter 1999. Dollars spent on customer retention rose in this same period from 9 to 19%. This corresponded to a jump in repeat buyer revenue from 31% to 45%, an increase of 14%. Not a bad return on the investment, wouldn't you say?

Marketing

Within your business plan, you will develop a written marketing plan. This plan should address your marketing position and competitive advantages (what distinguishes your site from the competition; much can be learned from studying your competitors, on-line and off-line, as well as comparable sites in other markets), your target audience and the image and style of your presentation. You must also consider the purpose of your site. Is it a stand-alone online store only, or does it complement catalog, mail order, retail, or wholesale marketing efforts? A catalog, as well as your print and broadcast advertising, can direct a customer to your web site to find additional sales, specials, and e-mail marketing bulletins. Your marketing plan will explain how you will attract and keep visitors at your site, as well as how you plan to ensure their return.

Customer satisfaction is key; for a successful web site, you must make the buying experience simple, pleasurable, safe, and easy-to-understand. **All the banner ads, glitz and special effects you can add to your site will never make up for an unpleasant customer experience.** A customer's word-of-mouth advertising can be one of your most important marketing tools. It's estimated in some studies that the conversion of "visitor" to "buyer" increases in the e-commerce industry by 40% if the customer service experience is improved. This increase translates to a 10% raise in the average internet order size industry-wide. You will also need to include the cost of customer service within the expense portion of your business plan.

Online Marketing

E-mail as a marketing tool

Failing to collect e-mail addresses of visitors to your site can be a major error in on-line business. Programs that will help you manage your e-mail subscription list include Yahoo!Groups (www.yahogroups.com), Topica (www.topica.com), KowaBunga Technologies' Opt-In Pro (www.myaffiliateprogram.com/u/a/to.asp?id=3051) and EmailFactory (www.emailfactory.com).

When collecting e-mail addresses, the safe way to go is using an autoresponder that delivers your content (including your URL) in your reply. Use your autoresponder to send at least three follow-up messages to visitors requesting more information. The first response should be sent instantly. Continuing contact with your prospects is necessary for increasing returns on time and money invested.

Why are You Doing This?

When sending customers or prospective customers an e-mail, it's best to use a "hook," the most important part of your e-mail. Your hook is the purpose of the e-mail and should be stated within the first two sentences. The hook or intent of your e-mail should be simple, clear and to the point.

The remainder of your e-mail supports or explains the information in the hook and is written in order of importance. For instance, your hook could read “40% off all children’s shoes.” The remainder of your e-mail would advertise the brands of children’s shoes available at your store, effective dates of the sale and sizes available. Do not place key information in the middle or end of an e-mail. Adding information that is not relevant makes it more difficult for your customer to notice the hook of your e-mail, reducing your opportunity to turn that e-mail into a sale.

The three most effective parts of your e-mail are the subject line, the first line of the body of the e-mail and your P.S. at the end. As customers scan your e-mail, these three elements will be the most frequently read and are often what determines whether the customer reads further.

Your subject line should be clear in its purpose and what the customer will receive for opening the e-mail. A shortened version of the hook often works well as your subject line. As stated previously, the first line of your e-mail often contains your hook. And the P.S. at the end of the mailing is a good way to remind the customer of an important point within the mail, such as discounts, deadlines, etc.

Keep it Short and Sweet

Keep the e-mail as short as possible. Many customers are overwhelmed by the volume of mail they receive. Brief messages are likely to be read first. Customers are also more likely to scan the body of the mail quickly, so it must be easy to read. Lists or section headings should be set apart by using dashes, bullets, or font changes. Don’t make your e-mail one long block of text; break up the information into shorter pieces of related information.

Involve Your Customer

Use the active voice in your e-mails, rather than the passive. The active voice makes the subject a participant in the e-mail opportunity rather than being acted on.

Examples:

Passive

Many new discounted items are available at our web site.

Active

Check out the new discounts available at our web site.

Set the Tone

Match the tone or attitude of your e-mail to suit your business and audience. Should your e-mail be fun, irreverent, and casual or formal and somber? It depends on your product or service and your target market. Don't get too wordy; you're not writing the GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL. Keep the language simple and easy to understand; use industry jargon or terms as little as possible if it does not pertain to your reader. Remember, less can be more. Every sentence should contain useful information. Don't let the empty space in the body of the e-mail lure you into dragging the information out.

Avoid Wrapping URLs

To make links within your e-mail effective, avoid URLs that wrap (broken into two lines); they often fail to work. If possible, reduce the length of the URL to fit on a single line. Avoid placing the URL in the middle of a paragraph. Insert a return and starting a new line with the URL is a good cure for this problem. If the URL is too long to fit onto one line, remind your reader to copy/paste the URL into his browser to achieve the link.

Grammar, Structure and Punctuation

Keep your text to 68 characters or less per line; otherwise, the text may become distorted. Type your e-mail newsletter in a plain text editor, Microsoft Outlook or Outlook express, or your e-mail program, not in a word processor such as Microsoft Word or Corel's WordPerfect. For Microsoft Windows, you may want to use UltraEdit (www.ultraedit.com); if you're a Macintosh user, BBEdit and its free version BBEdit Lite (www.barebones.com) is suggested. Linux users can choose between emacs and vi.

Avoid overusing ALL CAPS, ***** and exclamation points. Understandable language and proper spacing can be equally, if not more, effective. Lines of hyphens and equal signs can also be used to emphasize area of text. As with all advertising, using enough "white space" around your text is advised. Double spacing between paragraphs and sections makes your text easier to read. Paragraphs should not exceed more than three or four lines of text. Instead of writing a full paragraph, why not make your statements with "bullets"?

Unsubscribe

An **absolute must** in good e-mail newsletter form is the **option to unsubscribe**. Should your customer choose to unsubscribe from your mailing list, make it quick and easy. The option is often offered at the bottom of the mailing, set apart from the contact information and easy to locate. It is sometimes useful to ask the customer why he is unsubscribing.

Privacy Issues

Of major concern to your e-mail subscribers and web site visitors is the privacy of their personal information. You should develop and post a privacy policy for your site. Guidelines are available at TrustE (www.truste.com) and the Direct Marketing Association (www.the-dma.org).

Ezines

What is an Ezine? An Ezine is an informational online publication delivered to subscribers **with permission** via email. Ezines can be effective in two ways. You can advertise your site in someone else's ezine (preferably in a related product or subject area) or you can write your own ezine and distribute it to subscribers and potential customers of your site.

Writing Your Own E-Zine

If you produce your own Ezine publication, you can keep your customers informed about your products, how your products can be used, new product lines, and information on your company and its related industry. How does this differ from email? It is more in-depth, more informative, content-rich, and usually longer. It is usually focused on a particular topic or subject that relates to your business or the customers of your business. Most Ezines are free to subscribers and are delivered daily, weekly or monthly.

Ezines are based on opt-in mailing lists (if they have good customer service standards in place). Opt-in means that the person receiving your ezine requested to be sent the information and has given you permission to do this. People who subscribe to an Ezine **WANT** that Ezine. This means they are people who are interested in the topics that relate to your product or service, if you choose Ezines that are appropriate to your target market.

Companies offering newsletter or ezine services include Sparklist (www.sparklist.com) and PostMaster General (www.postmastergeneral.com).

Advertising In Other E-Zines

When considering your advertising options, the Ezine is a viable addition to print advertising. Don't get the wrong idea; you don't want to abandon one form of advertising for another. However, in some circumstances Ezines can be more targeted, effective, and cost-efficient than print advertising. According to Boston Consulting Group, in third quarter 2000, about 64% of online retailers' marketing budgets were spent on online media. This was an increase in spending of 5% from the second quarter that resulted in a **28% increase** in new customers.

Ezines can be a cost-efficient form of advertisement when compared to traditional print publication. Many publications can average as much as \$15 to \$25 dollars per word for classified ads or \$200-300 per column inch for advertising space. Because of the lower cost for production and delivery, Ezines ads are usually much less expensive. Feature advertising using full color graphics is also much less expensive than a full color press run.

Print magazines can contain literally dozens of competitive advertisements. Ezines often contain no more than a dozen ads which are not surrounded by other content. Where will you be more likely to be seen?

Delivery of your ad to your target market can be almost instantaneous. Because Ezines are usually delivered on a daily or weekly basis, you can see the effects of your ad very quickly and make adjustments as needed. Most newspapers require at least two weeks lead time and most magazines plan their layouts at least two or three months in advance of publication, making changes difficult. And remember, you're going GLOBAL. Can you imagine how many newspapers and magazines worldwide that you would have to advertise in to reach the same potential market base?

An effective ad for Ezines will point out buying incentives such as bonuses, money back guarantees, rebates, coupons, and FREE offers. Use short sentences that are to the point and add keywords that will grab your customers' attention from the beginning of the ad. Your ad should provide information about your product or service, not shove a sales pitch down the readers' throats. Increasingly, customers are wary of strong-arm sales tactics and too much hype in email content.

ALWAYS include a hyperlink to your website and your email address. This provides an almost instant gratification for your customer; when he sees your ad and wants to know more, he can click your link and be transported instantly to your site. Make sure the page he clicks to is worthy of his time and effort.

As with any form of advertising, you should have a plan. Do your homework when choosing where you'll advertise. Look at your marketing needs and budget; who is your target market and what Ezines are written to reach that market? The Ezine should be able to supply you with demographics (# of subscribers, their ages, occupations, recreations and other statistics relevant to the readers of the publication). This will help you decide whether the Ezine will reach your potential customer base. Ask if they offer special promotions for first-time advertisers or seasonal advertising packages that might gain you more for your advertising dollar.

Ezine publishers who frequently swap ads include:

<http://globeclubs.theglobe.com/clubs/adswappers>
<mailto:Ezine-Ad-Swaps-subscribe@topica.com>
<mailto:AdSwapsforYou-subscribe@egroups.com>
mailto:swap_it-subscribe@listbot.com (swap_it)
<mailto:EzineAdSwap-subscribe@topica.com>
<mailto:ezineadexchange-subscribe@topica.com>
mailto:LB-Ad_Swaps-subscribe@egroups.com (Ad_Swaps)

Pop-Up and Pop-Under Ads

The debate rages on—are pop-up and pop-under ads effective? It may depend on what you call effective. Many surfers seem to consider these ads to be intrusive and annoying, and judging from the number of programs now designed to eliminate or block these ads, you have to wonder how well they work. New studies are finding that most people ignore these ads and close them within 20 seconds of seeing them. They have also found that conversion rates and click-throughs are generally quite low. However, many sites that use these ads claim significant increases in the number of visitors to their sites.

Search Engines: How will your customers find you?

You've heard the old saying, "If you build it, they will come." Don't count on it. You are one of literally millions on the web; chances are, at least a dozen other entrepreneurs are selling nearly the same product or service as you. And, you're taking your product GLOBAL. This means you are competing against similar businesses in Mexico, China, Australia, Japan, and the list goes on and on. As your market place grows with the global concept, so does the competition.

How will your customers find your site, the site you consider to be one of a kind, because your business is one of a kind? The most popular method is, as always, using search engines and online directories. What's the difference, you ask?

Search engines are automated indexing systems that send robotic "spiders" to your website to crawl, or scan and index, some or all of your web pages. A directory is a listing edited by humans that describe your website. Spiders require continual re-evaluation and possible resubmission.

To get the search engines to notice your site, you have to register your web pages. The search engines you should register with include AltaVista, Excite\WebCrawler, FAST Search, Google, Inktomi-based engines, Lycos, Ask Jeeves/Direct Hit, and GoTo (additional fees required). Inktomi offers pay for inclusion services for additional fees and requires specific optimization for their search engine. You can submit your web pages at each engine individually or all at one time using submission systems such as All4one Submission Machine (www.all4one.com/all4submit/) or JimTools (www.jimtools.com). It may be several weeks before your listings actually appear on the web. AltaVista receives more than 1 million page submissions per day.

Equally important are the directories. One of the largest, well-known directories is Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com). Yahoo! reviews web sites before they will list them on their directory for quality control. You also need to list your pages in the DMOZ Open Directory Project (www.dmoz.org) and Looksmart (www.looksmart.com). Sometimes search engines and directories are combined. Some directories require hand submission and payment to be included within their listings, including Yahoo! and LookSmart. LookSmart offers subsite listings for additional fees, making it necessary to choose category selections carefully. Yahoo! requires a fee for home page Business Express services.

Free Listings, Paid Inclusions, Paid Submissions

An important part of understanding today's search engine submission process is understanding the links from portals to other engines. LookSmart shows links and listings from its directory as well as Inktomi's database of spidered sites. It distributes its reviewed listings to MSN, Excite, AltaVista, iWon, CNN and more than 200 other ISPs, so that searchers can find your link on those sites also. For this kind of coverage, many would consider the \$199 submission review fee to be well worth the money. Be sure to make your submission to LookSmart directly, not to one of its affiliates, for the most bang from your buck.

AOL Search gives links and listings from their own content as well as the Netscape Open Directory (DMOZ), <http://www.dmoz.org>, and Inktomi.

Yahoo! gives results from searching its own database of reviewed sites as well as Google's database of spidered sites. Because Yahoo! distributes its results with no other sites, you have to wonder if paying to be reviewed (which doesn't mean you get listed) is really worth the money.

To submit to the Netscape Open Directory, you must submit your site to its parent site, DMOZ, <http://www.dmoz.org>. Listing is free and DMOZ submits their findings to hundreds of other sites.

NBCi/SNAP gives results from NBCi's directory and Inktomi's database of spidered sites. You have to first submit your site to the NBCi LiveDirectory; once accepted, you'll receive promotion instructions. And, yes, there is a fee.

META Tags, Keywords, Content, Themes: How They Can Make or Break You

Good marketing is more than just being listed with the search engine. Think of all the businesses jostling for position *within* the search engine, known as search engine placement. What determines search engine placement? META tags, in part. META tags are lines of programming code within your document and are not visible unless you are viewing the programming language. META tags include the title of your web pages. Each web page should have a descriptive, interesting title or HEAD section. Description META tags are the first couple of sentences they display below your web page title. This should be approximately 200 characters. The keywords META tag should include the words someone might use to search for your site. This can be as many as several dozen. Separating keywords by spaces helps search engines to make more possible combinations. Keywords used within your title or HEAD META tags do not have to be the same for every page.

One way of determining keywords for your site is to use website logs to identify the top ten most popular search queries for your store site category. Website log and traffic analyzer software is available from a variety of companies; run a search for “website logs.” These ten queries would be keywords. Within your site, you can then construct a page of products or services for each of these ten keywords. These individual pages might show the top-selling items within that category or keyword, while providing links to other information or related items. Each page of your site should focus on one of your customer’s goals. Don’t include anything that doesn’t help your customer achieve that goal.

Search engine registration and directory listing are just the first steps in the process. Now you must consider search engine optimization (SEO) or search engine positioning. Every search engine has a complex formula for deciding which web pages are shown as the top ten sites in a user’s search results. These formulas are not known, but in the past they have included measurements of “keyword density” in the web page title, META tags, the first 100 words of body text and other parts of the page.

The formulas have now evolved from quantity to quality. Top-quality copywriting skills that will sell to your customers is a priority; this takes a good deal of time and copy should be updated frequently. Quality content has become crucial. To optimize page content, you should consider six things: keywords and keyword phrases, keyword placement and coding, quality content through quality copywriting, site navigation design using text hyperlinks, and link popularity.

On every page of your site are specific keywords or keyword phrases (two or more words) that you can identify as strategic keywords. Keyword phrases are usually more effective. Put your keywords in all the HTML tags in your site, including meta tags. Because not all search engines can read meta tags, you need to put keywords in as many HTML tags as you can, including image Alt tags, !comments tags, and heading tags. Keywords or phrases should appear in all critical locations of your web pages.

It is helpful to select your keywords during your initial site design, when your focus is on communicating the purpose of your Web site to your potential customer. Start by asking:

- ❑ What is your site's focus?
- ❑ Why is it valuable?
- ❑ Who is your target audience?

When choosing your keywords or keyword phrases, DO NOT use trademark or competitors' names. If you wish to use trademark names, contact the trademark owner and request permission.

If you already have an established business, quiz your current customers about what words or phrases they would use to look for your product or service on the Web. Don't limit your keywords to your product, however; also develop keywords that describe the information that is available on your site.

After deciding your keywords or keyword phrases, you'll need to know how many other sites use those keywords and how many people actually search on those keywords. Pick several top search engines and search using your keywords and phrases and see how many results they return. If your keywords are too broad, your sites will be competing with literally thousands of other sites. If you use a keyword that is often misspelled, include that misspelling in your keywords (but not, of course, in your visible content). Use both singular and plural forms of your keywords as well, within the META tags and visible content.

Keywords/phrases must be written throughout the copy, especially the first 100 words, of all your pages. Spider engines are looking for HTML text, not graphics. Sites using large graphic illustrations not only cripple download time but are also less likely to be found by the spiders. Image-map links can also be a pitfall for search engine optimization. Some spiders can't follow these and will not be able to index your interior pages, which usually contain some of your most important information. What to do? Add hyperlinks (links within a page that takes your user to different locations on that page or to other pages). Be sure to add hyperlinks to your home page. These hyperlinks should lead to your most important interior pages or to major sections of your web site. Search engines will find these links quickly if placed along the bottom of home page. You can also increase the chances of a spider locating your interior pages by creating and submitting a site-map page with text links to all important areas within your site. This means you simply create a web page that has text links to the other main pages within your site and submit that page's address to the search engines. Good site structure includes a site map, contact us, about us, mission statement, and product pages.

Many search engine formulas consider link popularity when deciding high rankings, so you need to link to as many quality sites as possible. Your link popularity score is the total number of external sites that link to yours. Your link importance score is the number of high quality sites that link with yours. Invite others to link to your site by including a link-instruction page on your site with instructions for exactly how you want the link to look on the linking sites. It can be a text link, a graphic link, or your URL. Remember, however, you want quality more than quantity because a quality site receives more visitors.

When you're just starting out with a new site, getting enough links to your site can be a challenge. **This is where you can't afford to be passive.** Search the Internet to find sites related to yours, list them and start making contacts. Email the webmaster of each site and give a brief explanation of how a link to your site could benefit their visitors. Make this a personal appeal, not a form letter. Offer to exchange links, with a link to them on your site first and include the full, appropriate URL. Make it easy for them by suggesting the section(s) of their site where a link to you would be most appropriate and include the HTML code in your email. Links made to your site can be tracked with several programs. These include TrackEngine, TracerLock, and Mind-It.

You can also generate links by registering with a link exchange service. A link exchange service is exactly what it sounds like. For instance, in return for running banner ads or links to five other members' sites on your site, four ads or links featuring your site will be shown by other members of the exchange. Many link exchange programs exist and can be found simply by searching the Internet for "link exchanges." After registering, the service adds you to the links page that their other members place on their sites. Most link exchange programs are free but may place restrictions on the links for quality control. These can include displaying a specific icon on your home page that directs visitors to your links page, uploading updated links pages periodically, and submitting your site with the links page to search engines on a regular basis. Review the link exchange service's rules and requirements carefully.

Search engine formulas for search engine optimization change often. This means the pages the search engines scan have to change often to adapt to the new requirements. Gateway or doorway pages can point to the main web site (they open with your logo, company name and a link saying something like "Click here for the best bargains in electronics"). Sometimes gateway pages use an HTML frame system containing the main web page within it (this is HTML program coding where the main page is written within a gateway page). **However, doorway pages can be dangerous to your site if used improperly and we do not recommend their use.** Doorway pages must be product oriented, viewable and properly submitted to the search engines. If not, Internet Protocol (IP) redirects send up a red flag to the search engine that the page is a possible scammer. This can cause site blocking and possible removal from hosting servers. Doorway pages should be constructed carefully, cautiously, and with quality content in mind.

For every keyword, a gateway page should be made for every search engine's use. You may have several gateway pages for each keyword, depending on how many search engines you are targeting. For instance, if one of your keywords is "widgets," you would make a gateway page for "widgets" and submit that gateway page to one search engine. If you are submitting to seven search engines, you will have a "widgets" gateway page for each one, making seven "widgets" gateway pages.

Every search engine and directory has its own requirements for listing sites in its database. For best results, URL submissions should be made by hand. Submission software programs such as All4one Submission Machine (www.all4one.com/all4submit/) or JimTools (www.jimtools.com) are also available. Again, meet the requirements of each search engine. Your location and IP address are shown to search engines and directories, so if you abuse the directions, your IP address may be blocked from future submissions. Most search engines and directories post their "Add URL" instructions and links from their home pages. Click on these and follow the instructions as you go. Bookmarking the "Add URL" page isn't a bad idea, either. Submission to directories (Yahoo!, LookSmart, and Open Directory Project) has to be done by hand because you have to select a category. Do it carefully; you want to choose the category that nets you the most impact. When submitting pages, identify those which will remain on your site for the life of your site and submit those pages.

It's a good idea to examine the search engine guidelines before you start submitting; some engines only accept a specific number of pages within a certain time period. This varies from engine to engine. Check the requirements of each search engine. Some will not allow site submission by autosubmission programs.

Once you have submitted your pages, you'll need to confirm that they have been registered. Every engine or directory will have a timeline posted showing when your pages will be registered and listed within its database. This is sometimes called indexing. This time frame can be several months to a year.

After the time for posting has passed, query or search the engine or directory for your site's pages to confirm they have been listed (registered). If your pages have not been registered, you have to resubmit. Do this only after you are sure they haven't been registered. **You can be penalized for oversubmitting and mass submission.** If you have many pages, you may want to consider software which tracks your submissions and registrations. Some programs designed for this are TopDog and WebPosition. Only use this software to monitor registration once or twice a month for the most accurate results.

The search for your web pages should result in one of three things:

- 1) resubmission if your site is not found
- 2) reoptimization because your site was not listed in the top 30
- 3) you find your site listed in the top 30 and you don't need to do anything else, **FOR NOW**

Remember, search engine optimization is an on-going process.

Should you hire a professional search engine positioning (SEP) firm? It depends on your needs, your budget and the abilities of the people within your company. Consulting services usually contract for 12 months, including a retainer and a month-to-month billing cycle, and charges can easily range into the thousands of dollars. Initial positioning can range from \$1,000 to \$5,000 with additional fees of \$100-\$300 per month to maintain positioning. If you do want to hire a professional, ask for and CONTACT references.

Using On-Line Press Releases to Increase Your Search Engine Rankings

One inexpensive way of getting the word out about your product or site is using on-line services that offer free press release coverage. This is especially useful for promotion of a long-term service or product which you will offer over an extended period of time.

According to Marcia Yudkin, author of *Six Steps to Free Publicity* and *Internet Marketing for Less than \$500/Year*, you can profit from using free press releases in six simple steps.

- 1) Determine a keyword phrase that is tied to your product or service and that people would actually use in a search. Researching keywords is vital for search engine placement. More information is available at Wordtracker.com.
- 2) Put this keyword phrase in your press release headline and repeat it three times within the body of your press release. Also include two complete links to your Web site (for example, <http://www.mydomain.com> instead of mydomain.com) within your press release.
- 3) Unless your product or service is already well-known as a brand, use its generic description as your keyword phrase and often within the press release. For instance, use “pain relieving back massager” instead of “The Back Doctor.”
- 4) Substitute keyword phrases for pronouns like “it” or “its” to increase frequency within the release.
- 5) Post your finished press release at sites that allow free postings. To find some of these services, try searching with “free press release submission” or “free press release distribution.”

Some of these include

<http://www.prweb.com>

<http://www.pressbox.co.uk>

<http://www.industrypages.com/> (industry specific)

<http://www.mamalinux.com> (related to Linux only)

<http://www.vcaonline.com/news/> (related to venture capital)

<http://www.gloreal.com/submitnews.asp> (related to real estate)

<http://www.mi2n.com/input.php3> (related to music)

Some of these sites will welcome general topics; others are industry-specific.

- 6) After a few weeks, check your site's standing in the search engines using the phrases in your press release. Positionagent.com is a useful site for doing this. Repeat this process for other products and services you wish to promote.

Customizing Your Site

A recent study by Cyber Dialogue found that 53% of consumers are more likely to buy from a web site with personalization features. 63% are more likely to register (a primary source for your e-mail/ezine promotions).

Coupons

On-line coupons have proven to be effective for many sites. Cyber Dialogue found that one-fifth of people online in the US download coupons; 57% of those people redeemed them.

Offline Marketing

Catalogs promoting a business' products and services are the number one offline driver of visitors to the company's web site. Your catalog should include your toll-free telephone number as well as your web site address (URL) and e-mail address. You may also want to offer your catalog online.

Direct mail advertising in a variety of forms can be effective. You may want to mail a basic postcard featuring your URL and a redeemable discount code to be used at your site. Direct mail can be a postcard, self-mailer, tri-fold brochure or catalog, depending on the number of products and services you wish to feature and your budget.

Designing Your Web Site

Simplify, simplify, simplify! Your e-business strategy focuses on the customer experience, with simplicity in all respects. Make it easy for your customers to find and purchase your products online.

Understand the difference between making your web site usable and making it pleasurable; it is much more than ensuring properly working links and quick downloads. The customer experience is a combination of what your customer sees, feels, hears, or interacts with on your site. Your business' goals and interests, messages on your site, graphics, color, flow between pages and additional features all play a part in the customer's overall satisfaction. The common ground between your site's goals and what your customer expects creates the most favorable customer experience. **You must transform what can be an intimidating technological experience into something your customer perceives as an added value to his life, enticing him to return for more.**

Key questions to ask yourself as you develop your customer service experience plan are:

- ❑ Who are our target customers?
- ❑ What do customers expect from our site? Why would they return or recommend our site to other potential customers?
- ❑ How will customers achieve their expectations? What technologies and features can they use, how long will it take, is it simple?

Several methods can be used to determine what customer experience should be expected and delivered. You can:

- ❑ Determine where your customer interacts with your site, both online and offline, and pinpoint areas of improvement or excellence
- ❑ Integrate online and offline customer experiences
- ❑ Create links on your site for customer feedback about where the site works or does not work for the customer; reward the customer for giving feedback by offering "freebies" or discount coupons
- ❑ Create possible scenarios of how your customers may use your site and optimize for those scenarios, possibly even creating an "ideal site" prototype
- ❑ Make results of your customer feedback, monitoring, measurement, and outside consultations available to your personnel.

To evaluate your customer experience process, use objective methods as much as possible. Seeking customer feedback, running usability tests or listening tabs, and bringing in outside consultants are all valid ways to gather objective data. Using objective measurement tools helps to ensure that you design the site with your user's best interest in mind. Measure your conversion rate of visitor to buyer and make sure your entire organization understands its importance. The conversion rate is a much more accurate measurement of your site's success or failure than measuring "hits" or "registrations."

Finally, remember that customer service is not a one-time event (unless you haven't implemented the above techniques). It requires continual monitoring, testing and objective guidance. As the needs of your customers change, so will the goals for your site's customer service experience. Customer service monitoring will be necessary as long you remain in business.

The Home Page

Your web site's home page is responsible for making that crucial first impression. It must produce a pleasurable or satisfactory experience for your customer if you want to entice him further into your site and the buying process. Your home page should load quickly, clearly communicate the purpose of your site and help the customer achieve his goals.

Graphics images on the internet are in three major formats: GIF, JPEG and PNG (which includes MNG). Each format has advantages and disadvantages.

One of the important factors dealing with web images is size of the image file and image optimization. How small can you make the file (remember, the smaller the file size, the faster it is to download) while keeping the quality as high as possible.

Most of us are familiar with BMP (bitmap) images. This is a primitive format, based on varying intensities of red, green, and blue, with a possible 16 million colors. The files are generally very large and are most often seen in collections of wallpapers and desktop themes. The most frequently seen BMP images we see are the JPEG and GIF images.

GIF images consist of no more than 256 colors and can be used in almost every graphics program. JPEG photos are used to display photographs and similar images where color detail is essential. JPEGs have the ability to display 16 million colors; however, when a JPEG file is compressed, it removes a certain number of pixels (dots of color) away. When a compressed image is enlarged, the program invents new pixels, using the colors around them. This sometimes results in a fuzzy image or jagged edges (pixelation). JPEG is the preferred format for photographs and fine art.

PNG is similar to the GIF format but allows for 16 million colors without losing colors like a JPEG file does. Most graphics editors which support PNG files also handle their compression. This format is not suitable for web sites at this time because browsers don't support this format well. GIF files are good for line drawings and objects with sharp edges and no more than 256 colors. Become familiar with how these formats use colors and how many colors you need to get the image you want.

Remember, graphics and flashy animation slow the loading of your home page. Most users access the web at only 14, 400 baud. Your customer's time is valuable to him and, therefore, to you. You should also remember that many users may be accessing your site with limited technology, sometimes slow and precarious. Large graphics can also be detrimental to handicapped customers accessing your site. Web research firm Jupiter Media Metrix recommends web pages be no larger in file size than 40 to 50KB. A page this size downloads in about 8 to 10 seconds over a 56-kps (kilobytes per second) connection. A page's weight includes graphics, buttons, HTML code, JavaScript code and basic page text. All links, navigation buttons and icons should be clearly labeled without having to roll the mouse over them. A first-time user tips link is a good way to help your new visitors become familiar with your site.

To ask or not to ask, that is the question. For many people (including businesses), the Internet is still new territory. As business owners, we would like to know more about visitors to our site. We want to know if our advertising is hitting the right target and how we can make visiting the site a more personalized experience for the visitor, matching their interests to specific areas of the site. However, one of the great ironies of the Internet is that while a user is looking for exactly what **he** wants and expects to find it, he isn't going to make it easy to give it to him.

According to a 2001 report from Statistical Research, 67% of U.S. Internet users will abandon a site when asked to submit personal data. 65% of experienced users left the site compared to 72% of new net users. 21% said they simply give the site false information to gain access. 28% of those surveyed said they are more likely to give personal information if given a guarantee against credit card fraud. A prominent privacy policy on the site also persuades a visitor to submit personal information.

If customer registration will help to achieve your customer's goals or enhance his experience on your site, include it on your site. **However**, these are a few traps to avoid.

- ❑ Do not require your customer to register before viewing any portion of the site. How can your customer know if he wants to register if he has no idea whether your site interests or helps him?
- ❑ Do not make registration a lengthy process or too intrusive with requests for irrelevant personal information.
- ❑ Do not require an elaborate username and password. Many sites successfully allow the customer to use his e-mail address as his username.

A few **Dos...**any site that hopes to have an ounce of respect with its visitors will have a well-written privacy statement telling the visitor exactly what it will and won't do with the information it's given. If information is going to be shared, an opt-in box should be included in the information form so the visitor can tell you whether he agrees to this or not. It should always be explained whom the information may be disclosed to and for what purpose. Consider these questions carefully. The more the information is shared with others outside your company, the less likely you are to receive an honest submission of personal information.

Site Search Engines

Offering search capabilities within your site can be an added perk for the visitor **if it works properly**. However, an in-site search engine that gives bad results can cause more harm than good.

Several companies offer search engine hosting that allows you to have a custom results page that fits your site's look and feel, as well as reports of how your users are searching. The process is generally very simple, requiring registration, choosing your customization options, then cutting and pasting the HTML generated for you on to your web pages. For more specific information, read the FAQs for each service; you might even want to set up a free trial with each service and compare the results. Some of the companies offering site search services include:

Atomz

<http://www.atomz.com>

Atomz offers free search for sites up to 500 pages, a Prime Search plan for \$100 per year for sites up to 50 pages, and the price ranges upward for larger sites.

Mondo Search

<http://www.mondosoft.com>

Mondo Search offers free search for a limited trial period, as well as multi-language support.

PicoSearch

<http://www.picosearch.com/>

PicoSearch offers free search for sites up to 1,500 pages with unlimited searching, as well as a Professional plan for \$199 per year for up to 3,000 pages and a Premium plan at \$399 per year for up to 6,000 pages.

Sandy Bay

<http://www.sandybay.com>

Sandy Bay's search engine is offered as part of a package of e-marketing products. Free service is for a limited trial period only. Pricing starts at \$25 per month for 1,000 pages and 1,000 searches and ranges upward according to site size and traffic.

Further information on search engine hosts can be found at <http://www.searchenginewatch.com/resources/software.html> and <http://www.searchtools.com/tools/tools-remote.html>.

Merchandising

Effective online merchandising has the same main qualities as offline merchandising:

- ❑ Identify your customer's needs
- ❑ Recommend products relevant to your customer
- ❑ Advise your customer on how to use your product

Ultimately, you need your site to understand what products to suggest to your customer and when to suggest them. Understandably, this can be a difficult process in the past because of the technological barriers. Difficult but not impossible.

First, decide what your goals are. Are you introducing new product lines, targeting repeat customers with similar products, increasing profit margins or a combination of these? Then decide how well your product or promotion fits these goals by asking these questions.

Does your product:

- ❑ Appeal to target customers?
- ❑ Reduce overstock clearance?
- ❑ Optimize profit margins?
- ❑ Lead to new product introductions?
- ❑ Increase average order size through the use of product bundles, etc.?
- ❑ Fit your production schedule and inventory fluctuations?
- ❑ Represent your typical customer purchases based on previous transactions?

Not all of these questions may apply to your product but you should know which ones do. Supporting data such as product surveys and demographics, as well as industry knowledge and experience should be used as the basis for answering these questions. The products that best fit your merchandising goals should be promoted more heavily and place upon your home page for the customer's immediate attention.

Effective merchandising is also dependent upon displaying your products and related information clearly. Prices, sizes, colors, etc. should all be easy for your customer to find, preferably presented with any picture or graphic of the product.

Products or services may also be presented in a situational format. For instance, a link to “What to take on your next picnic” takes you to a page featuring products such as plastic dishes and utensils, picnic baskets, blankets, etc. It helps to give your customer ideas about how, when and where they can use your products. Links to add-on products available during the check-out process will increase your impulse buys as well. If your customer is buying that new printer, chances are he’ll need ink and paper as well. Make it easy for him to access those products without having to link to another category in your site.

Whenever possible, offer links to categories or sections of your site to make navigation easier. Using bold, colored headers to make these links stand out will help your customer meet his goals more quickly and easily. Product links, graphics and icons should be clickable, well-organized and easy to see. Links allowing the customer to compare products and prices should be consistent with the product category they are seeking. Charts (such as sizes, product lines, price ranges, etc.) should be easy to understand as well.

Out-of-stock items should be labeled as such at the initial point of display, along with the expected date of availability. Adding items to the shopping cart should be made as simple as possible.

Streamline the checkout process as much as possible. Keep options such as gift wrapping, gift cards, personal messages and gift certificate or coupon redemption contained to a one-page process. Information on shipping methods, prices and options should be easily accessed. During high volume periods, shipping delays should be anticipated as much as possible with a link from the home page explaining expected delays and ordering deadlines for insuring delivery. A follow-up e-mail to the customer including an order confirmation number and shipment tracking is also a good form of customer service. The check-out process can be a good time to ask your customers to sign up for targeted e-mails from your business. Be sure to ask them how frequently they would like to receive these targeted e-mails.

When considering your shipping structure, consider price carefully. According to a survey by Jupiter Media Metrix, 73% of consumers consider the total cost of a product, including shipping and handling, before buying it. It is a good idea to study the shipping and handling prices and policies of businesses similar to yours when forming your process. How these charges are handled will vary from business to business.

Make sure your return/exchange policy is clearly stated and easy to find. Other features can be included in your site if you remember to keep them simple, easy-to-use and easily understood. Use them only if they do not complicate the buying process. They include store locators and mapping pages, “bookmark” or “wish list” pages where customers can store products they may want to buy later, and pages within your site giving customers directions on use of the product.

The bottom line is that if your customer has to work at getting what he wants, chances are he's simply not going to bother. The entire concept behind buying through the internet is ease, convenience and time-saving. If your site can not meet these ideals, you will lose your potential customer. Too many clicks, too many times getting lost in a product maze, too much poking and prying into your client's personal information....all of these will send your customer clicking his way to your competitor's web site.

Summary

Measuring the success of your web site can be a confusing process and vary from business to business. These are the standard areas you should examine to judge your site's performance.

- ❑ Conversion rates, from order to buyer
- ❑ Sales per order
- ❑ Acquisition cost for each new customer
- ❑ # of repeat buyers
- ❑ Amount of sales from repeat buyers
- ❑ Abandoned shopping carts

Of these, the conversion rate and abandoned shopping carts are crucial. In 1999, approximately 65% of shopping carts were abandoned before purchase.

The convenience of your site is a valuable asset as well. Convenience includes the amount of time and effort a new customer expends from the start of the buying process to completing checkout.

Choosing a Host(s) for Your WebSite

What is hosting? Hosting is a service that makes a web site available on the Internet. When you pay a company to host your web site, you're basically renting space on their computer, which is connected full-time to the Internet. According to HostChart.com, three types of hosting platforms exist.

1) Shared hosting is the most common type of hosting. This means that you are sharing a web server (host) with other web sites. Think of it as being part of a neighborhood full of houses. You are one of the houses in Block A of the city. Block A is part of the city (i.e. your host server). Your house (web site) takes up space in the city. Most shared hosting plans come with a nice package of services, including hit counters and shopping carts. Fees range according to service needs. If you have a full e-commerce site, using shopping cards, credit card processing, catalogues, etc., you can expect to pay more that you will for a basic informational site.

2) Unix and Windows NT/2000 shared hosting are hosting platforms used by the types of programming languages used by your site. If you only have HTML pages on your site,

Unix is probably best because it is slightly cheaper than Windows hosting. Unix is also a good platform for sites using perl, PHP or Python. If your site uses a programming language called Active Server Pages and/or is connecting to a database such as Microsoft Access or SQL server, then you will want to use Windows NT or Windows 2000 hosting.

3)Dedicated servers are for sites needing or wanting total control of their server. They are much more expensive than shared hosting, are for experienced developers and usually have few additional services. If you don't KNOW you need it, you probably don't. Dedicated servers can range from \$200 to \$1,000 per month depending on the hardware required.

A variety of hosting services are available with a wide range of services and prices. What kind of service you need depends on your goals as an online business. You may only need a simple two or three page site or you may need a site with a shopping cart, e-mail services, an on-line catalog or gallery of products, interactive pages such as surveys, automated e-mail send-out and response and much more.

Carefully read the host's service agreement or terms of agreement or use. If you have questions about what terms affect your store, e-mail the company and ask. These terms can affect major parts of your web store, including who owns the domain name and for how long, shopping carts, secure payments for your customers, and real time credit card processing. Look for **restrictions** places on your site by the host. These can include everything from content (adult materials, weapons, sweepstakes, etc.) to running certain types of files on your site, such as MP2 and MP3 files, audio and video files, etc. Many times, a host can close your site for violating these restrictions without any notice to you. Make sure you understand if a host will run **advertising** on your site, what kind it is and how much there will be. It may not suit the image of your site and may affect the design of your site elements. Check to see if your **privacy policy** conflicts with the host's policy; if your target market includes kids under the age of 13 years, you must comply with the federal privacy law regarding collecting information from children. **Take special notice of the word delete within your service contract.** Many companies have the right to delete all of your information from their servers when the agreement is terminated for any reason. This can include customer credit card information, and if you don't have a backup copy for your own records, future legal problems with customers may present a danger.

We are listing some of the hosting companies as well as brief descriptions. Keep in mind that services change frequently and you should consult the hosting site for current and complete information. The OSBDC at NWOSU is not endorsing or recommending these services or indicating preference and is not responsible for content or policy of these hosting services. Be aware that additional set-up charges and the cost of domain registration often apply in addition to monthly fees.

Southwestern Bell Shared Web Hosting advertises business web site hosting beginning at \$24.95 per month.

GoMerchant

<http://www.goMerchant.com>

GoMerchant.com provides a variety of services for internet stores, including the ability to process Visa and Mastercard with your own merchant account, a secure buying gateway, e-commerce software, customer buying and tracking, recurring billing, pull-down menus, unlimited products and hits, check acceptance, and mass e-mailing. Services start at \$49.95 per month. GoMerchant supports FrontPage 2000 extensions.

Hosting services are available through a variety of companies. As any good business decision should be made, you need to shop and compare. Make a list of what you need for your site. Is your site informational only, providing another advertising venue for your services or will you be selling products? Do you need a shopping cart system, a merchant account for credit card payments, online tracking of shipments, help with submitting your pages to the search engines, an on-line catalog, a chat room, an e-zine, e-mail services...the list can go on and on. Make your own list of needs and compare the hosting services available. Services are available for very basic sites and very advanced sites, with prices ranging accordingly.

To find some of the hosting services available, do a search on the Internet for "hosting services." ZDNet and HostChart.com are also excellent sources listing hosting services.

Reference Sources

www.cnet.com

www.clickz.com

www.webreference.com

www.netmechanic.com

www.ezined.com

www.promotewebz.com