

Business to Consumer E-Commerce: Selling on the Internet

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Objectives

This module contains basic information for teaching existing businesses and new business start-ups how to get started in selling products and services electronically to customers through a retail web site.

Participants will learn...

1. the factors businesses should consider regarding e-commerce;
2. what people are currently buying and selling via the Internet;
3. what e-customers want from a retail web site;
4. how to get started in building a web store;
5. how to choose and purchase a domain name;
6. the factors to consider for an online catalog and ordering system;
7. about online merchant accounts and payment processing;
8. about the importance of online customer communication and tracking systems;
9. about web hosting options;
10. design and technical considerations for retail web sites; and
11. how to market a web site.

Total Time Required

2 to 4 hours

Materials Needed

- PowerPoint slides and handouts of slides

Audio/Visual Equipment

- Overhead projector and screen
- Electronic classroom with Internet access (optional) - if this is available, the instructor can use a combination of lecture and hands-on approach to teaching.

Directions and Training Tips

The technology knowledge level of the audience may vary greatly, from those with little or no computer experience to those who already have a business web site up and going. Adequate preparation is essential; the instructor should have a good working knowledge of e-commerce and “all things web.”

Additional Background Reading

Refer to the following web sites for additional information on e-commerce:

<http://www.bizreport.com> - BizReport

<http://www.cyberatlas.internet.com> - CyberAtlas

<http://www.ecommerce-guide.com> - ECG

<http://www.ecommercetimes.com> - E-Commerce Times

<http://www.ecomworld.com> - EcomWorld

<http://www.forrester.com> - Forrester

<http://www.idc.com> - IDC

<http://www.internetindicators.com> - Internet Economy Indicators

<http://www.internic.net> - InterNIC

<http://www.jmm.com> - Jupiter Research

<http://www.nua.net/surveys> - NUA Internet Surveys

<http://searchenginewatch.com> - Search Engine Watch

<http://www.searchengines.com> - searchengines.com

<http://www.statmarket.com> - StatMarket

<http://www.census.gov/mrts/www/current.html> - United States Census Bureau
E-Commerce Retail Sales Statistics

<http://www.useit.com> - useit.com

<http://www.w3.org/WAI> - Web Accessibility Initiative



Buying and Selling Online is Here to Stay!

There's no doubt about it. The way we buy and sell consumer goods is changing – and it's changing quickly! The reason for the big change can simply be explained with one word - Internet. Estimates indicate that more than 580 million people are online worldwide. By the year 2005, the global Internet population will reach 1.17 billion [1]. A report released by the Census Bureau of the Department of Commerce estimated U.S. retail e-commerce sales for the second quarter of 2002 at \$10.2 billion, an increase of 24.2 percent from the second quarter of 2001. Total retail sales for the second quarter of 2002 were estimated at \$825.5 billion, an increase of 2.5 percent from the same period a year ago. The second quarter 2002 e-commerce estimate increased 3.7 percent from the first quarter of 2002, while total retail sales increased 11.0 percent from the prior quarter. E-commerce sales in the second quarter of 2002 accounted for 1.2 percent of total sales, while in the second quarter of 2001 e-commerce sales were 1.0 percent of total sales. In the first quarter of 2002 e-commerce sales were 1.3 percent of total sales [2].

Why are people buying products over the Internet? A survey of Internet shoppers gave the following reasons [3]:

- ❖ Ease of placing an order;
- ❖ Large selection of products;
- ❖ Cheaper prices;
- ❖ Fast service and delivery;
- ❖ Detailed and clear product information;
- ❖ No sales pressure; and
- ❖ Easy payment procedure.

What are people buying over the Internet? As of January 2002, the following product categories were selling (listed in descending order by revenues generated) [4]:

- ❖ Airline tickets
- ❖ Computer hardware
- ❖ Apparel
- ❖ Toys/Video games
- ❖ Consumer electronics
- ❖ Hotel reservations
- ❖ Books
- ❖ Music
- ❖ Videos
- ❖ Software
- ❖ Food/Beverages
- ❖ Jewelry
- ❖ Health/Beauty
- ❖ Car rental
- ❖ Linen/Home decor
- ❖ Sporting goods
- ❖ Footwear
- ❖ Office supplies
- ❖ Tools/Hardware
- ❖ Small appliances
- ❖ Furniture



- ❖ Flowers
- ❖ Appliances
- ❖ Garden Supplies

What does all this mean to small business? It means the Internet is a new way to expand business opportunities. It is proving to be a great equalizer, allowing the smallest of businesses and those in rural locations to access markets and have a presence that allows them to compete on equal footing. It also means businesses should watch this trend and develop a strategy to position themselves in the new Internet economy. In developing a strategy, first ask, “Does the business need a web site?” and, “What does the business want to accomplish by establishing a web site?” Don’t make the mistake of hurriedly creating a web site without serious thought and business planning.

Small businesses are using the Internet to create new markets, provide information about products/services 24 hours a day, service customers, get customer feedback, and sell products. Basically, these can be boiled down into three main reasons why businesses establish web sites: marketing, customer support, and sales.

Many businesses have sites that create a presence on the web and are what some term a “brochure” site. They serve as an advertising/promotional tool for the business, providing information about the business but not actually selling products online. The Internet has significantly reduced the cost associated with obtaining information about products, and many people use the Internet to research products and then purchase them off line. A web site may provide a telephone number and/or fax number for actual ordering. Many companies have found this type of web site an effective tool for servicing customers by providing product information and specifications, providing answers to frequently asked questions, and communicating with customers. Some businesses start out with brochure sites and grow into full-service transactional sites.

A full-service transactional web site not only creates a web presence but is also designed for accepting and processing orders online in real time.

Like any other marketing or sales effort, setting up and running a business web site will cost money. The cost can range from next to nothing to thousands of dollars, depending on the purpose of the site, size of the site, how much is done in-house, and how much is out-sourced. The bottom line is that a small business with a well thought-out strategy and plan can be doing business online in a short period of time and for a reasonable amount of money.

While the traditional ways of doing business should not be totally abandoned, given current trends and predictions, it is essential that small businesses embrace the use of the Internet as a vehicle for sales. The businesses that position themselves now for a technology-driven future increase their chances of survival.

What Do E-Customers Want?

An important question that needs to be answered before an electronic retail (e-tail) web site is created is, “Who are the people that will be visiting my web site?” or, “Who is my customer or target market?” The more you know about your target market, the more you can adjust your web site contents. For instance, is the purpose of your web site to provide information or to market and sell a product or service? These are two very different objectives and creating a web site to address each objective may result in significantly different end products.

Before you start building your electronic storefront, do your homework. Go to the web and look very closely at existing e-tail sites. Evaluate them from a customer standpoint.



Here's what customers say they want:

- ❖ Clear/accurate product information and representation;
- ❖ Real-time answers through self-help features and toll-free telephone numbers;
- ❖ Good prices and clear representation of all charges;
- ❖ Secure transactions;
- ❖ Easy to use return/exchange policy;
- ❖ Quick processing and delivery time;
- ❖ Elimination of unknowns; and
- ❖ Shopper privacy.

A good place to start is with some of the most successful business sites, such as amazon.com and qvc.com. Even if your online business is going to be much smaller in scale than these sites, there are still lessons to be learned from them such as site design from a selling and customer standpoint.

In addition, Internet and e-tail customer research can provide guidance in web site development. According to a report on e-commerce from Forrester [5], exceptional customer service strongly increases future sales through return visits and word-of-mouth. The study showed that 90 percent of satisfied customers are likely to visit again, and 87 percent will tell family and friends about the site. A report by Jupiter [6] said 45 percent of online shoppers choose web sites based on word-of-mouth recommendations. The Forrester [5] report further indicated that Internet shoppers *expect* e-commerce sites to have customer service readily available throughout the buying experience.

So when it comes to building an e-tail web store, the question becomes, "Precisely what do e-customers want?" Internet shoppers want the following:

- ❖ Fun and easy to navigate sites — make the shopping experience at your e-tail site a pleasurable experience by making it user-friendly and easy to navigate. The site should be concise and informative. Potential customers may be reluctant readers, and by encumbering them with volumes of information, you may just encourage them to go elsewhere. Remember the three-click rule: if a customer can't accomplish what he or she wants to do within three clicks, then the system isn't working right [7].
- ❖ Quick download time — a major complaint among Internet users is long load times. Research indicates that 80 percent of web users cite download time as the number one problem [8]. Pages should be fast loading and not keep customers waiting. A couple of seconds is ideal, 10 to 15 seconds is ok, but take more than 20 seconds and your customer is gone. Keep in mind as you design your site that most consumers are connecting to the Internet via slow modems, and large graphics increase load times. Recent studies indicate that slow-loading web sites cause online consumers to abandon up to 50 percent of online transactions [9].
- ❖ Pages that appear professional — clean and simple is better than cluttered and complicated. In e-tail, you are selling, and your site should be designed to display and highlight what you are selling. The web store should reflect good use of the elements of art and principles of design, while at the same time be designed for online shopper usability. Don't get caught up in the latest bells, whistles, glitz and flash at the sacrifice of service and sales.
- ❖ Clear and accurate product information and representation — since customers cannot actually see, touch and feel products in person, the graphic representations must be clear and visually accurate. Product descriptions must be thorough and eliminate any guessing. The more clearly and accurately you represent your products on your web store, the less time you will have to spend answering questions about products and restocking returned merchandise from dissatisfied customers.



- ❖ Displaying an in-stock inventory count for products – this is particularly helpful for items that tend to be in short supply. Shoppers do not want to waste time ordering an item that is not even available. Inventory software is available that can make this an automated function on your web site.
- ❖ Real time answers through self-help features, e-mail and a toll-free telephone number – Internet shoppers want answers, and they want them quickly. E-mail and the telephone are the most used and the most preferred forms of contact, with e-mail ranking first. In both circumstances, it is key to customer satisfaction that someone be available to answer questions in a timely manner, preferably in real time. Real people providing real time answers add a human touch to doing business. Even online shoppers still prefer doing business with real people. According to a study by Jupiter Communications, 47 percent of people are more likely to buy online with the addition of real time interaction [6].
- ❖ However, many Internet shoppers prefer to find the information about products themselves. Provide easy-to-find answers to anticipated questions such as product information, minimum orders, shipping, warranties and pricing schedules. You must design your storefront so customers can easily find answers to their questions at your site, not your competitors. Offer self-help through the use of searchable databases, online videos and frequently asked question and answers sections. Ideally, web-based customer service should include both self-help and real time or live help capabilities [10].
- ❖ Good prices and clear representation of all charges – price is a major factor in closing a sale, so your prices must be competitive. Any additional charges such as shipping, handling, special delivery, gift-wrapping, custom or special orders, etc. should be clearly presented to the customer.
- ❖ Payment options – most Internet shoppers want to buy online in real time; however, there are people who prefer to purchase using an alternative method. Offer customers various means of ordering and paying for the items they select. You should offer the visitor the opportunity to order online, by telephone number (preferably a toll-free number), by fax or by mail.
- ❖ Secure transactions – customers consistently indicate credit card security is a primary concern when shopping online. Statistics indicate that you lose 50 to 60 percent of potential sales when you don't offer a secure transaction site. Include a statement about your web site's security system to help alleviate fears of using a credit card online to make a purchase.
- ❖ Easy to use return or exchange policy – online shoppers want the same or even better return and exchange policies that they are used to receiving in traditional retail. Your return policy should be clearly stated on your e-tail web site and should be as liberal as possible given the merchandise you are selling.
- ❖ Quick processing and delivery time – “we want it now” is the motto of Internet shoppers. It is critical that you have a delivery plan and system in place before you go online with your business. Inform customers as to when they can expect delivery at the time they place the order and after they place the order. Send another email message the day the product is actually shipped. Follow-up communication via e-mail is a frequently used and proven model for e-commerce.
- ❖ Shopper privacy – many consumers are concerned about protecting personal information and are leery about how the information they provide at e-tail sites might be used. Consider posting a privacy statement or policy on your web site, explaining to customers what information you collect about them and how you use it. Remember that from an ethical standpoint, if you post a policy, it is your responsibility to follow it.



Getting Started Building A Web Store

As with any business venture, there must be something to sell — a product, service or combination of the two. And as with any business venture, the more planning that goes in on the front end, the higher the chance of business success. These same principles hold true for e-commerce, whether it be a new virtual business or an existing business wanting to expand by selling via the Internet.

The information covered in this section provides the basics of how a small business can establish an electronic retail web site. This information is intended as a starting point for the many businesses thinking about going online but don't know where to begin. Establishing and maintaining an e-commerce web site takes a lot of research, planning and plain old hard work. However, the rewards can be great!

A small business venture that establishes a web site or web store that represents their products AND actually accepts and processes orders online is called a transactional e-tail web site. This type of online selling basically requires:

- ❖ a domain name/web address;
- ❖ a web store;
- ❖ online product catalog;
- ❖ ordering system/shopping cart;
- ❖ merchant account/payment processing;
- ❖ customer communication system;
- ❖ tracking system;
- ❖ a web server/host; and
- ❖ site marketing.

Domain Names

Early in the process of setting up an e-tail site, you need to decide on the domain name for the business, which is the name that will be in the URL (universal resource locator). The URL is the web address or location on the Internet for your e-tail web site — *www.yourname.com*. The name you choose is important. It should reflect what you sell and be easy for customers to remember. Once you have chosen your name, the next step is to see if it is available. If the name is available, you need to register it. Domain name extensions most commonly used for business sites include:

- ❖ .com - a general domain extension intended for commercial use;
- ❖ .net - a general domain extension primarily used for Internet infrastructure organizations/companies;
- ❖ .org - a general domain extension primarily used for not-for-profit organizations;
- ❖ .biz - a general domain extension intended for businesses;
- ❖ .info - a general domain extension intended for both commercial and non-commercial use.

There are free web sites that allow you to search domain names and determine if a specific URL has already been registered. For example, the *register.com* and *networksolutions.com* sites allow you to search domain names to determine if a particular web site address has been registered.

If the name has not been registered, you can register the domain name with one of the many registrars (companies that can provide domain name registration services). Registration gives you the right to a particular domain name for a specified number of years after which it has to be renewed annually. Currently, initial and renewal registrations are available in one-year increments, with a total registration period limit of ten years. Compare the different companies fees and accreditation and use the one with which you feel most comfortable.



Registering your domain is a simple process that can be accomplished in a short time, so put your time and effort into coming up with just the right name. You have heard the saying, “What’s in a name?” – Everything! When it comes to selling on the Internet, this can be very true. Your customers need to know how to reach you without having to think about it. So choose a name and choose it carefully – think like a customer!

It is important from a business standpoint to have your own unique domain name. Using your company’s name or your product’s name in your domain name makes it easy for customers to recall and remember the name at a future date. Including additional characters or words in the domain name only increases the likelihood of customers not being able to accurately recall your complete domain name. Some web hosting services and electronic shopping malls will help you get your site up and going, but your name is embedded within their domain name – *www.theirname/yourname.com*. Try to avoid this set up because it is often hard for customers to find your site and hard to build your own web identity.

Another issue to consider is buying multiple domain names or variations of the name you choose. For example, if you were growing and selling all varieties of red roses, a natural choice would be *redroses.com*. Variations might be *red-roses.com*, *redrose.com*, etc. You may also want to consider registering the name as a .com, .net, and .org. That means you have to register (and pay for) each domain name separately. However, from a business standpoint, that is a small investment to protect yourself from lost sales to a competitor who registers a variation of your domain name to draw your customers to their site. If you do register multiple domain names, each domain name can be structured so that it directs the customer to a single web site. Registering multiple domain names does not necessarily mean multiple web sites have to be developed.

[Note: For more detailed information and answers to frequently asked question regarding domain names, go to the U.S. Department of Commerce’s InterNIC, web site.]

Online Product Catalog

Your web store is more than just a web site – it must be designed from an e-tail perspective and contain features that make it easy to access and buy products. First it needs to contain an online product catalog that offers good quality and accurate graphic representation of each product you are selling. This is fundamental to selling on the web. Remember that customers cannot touch and feel your products, they can only see what is up on their screen, so products must look good and make customers want to buy them. (Many businesses that are already selling via mail order catalogs are a natural for selling on the web. They already have a print catalog that they can adapt to a virtual catalog as well.)

Keep in mind that download time for any web site should be quick. Internet shoppers are impatient and don’t want to wait more than a couple of seconds. Keep your graphic files as small as you can without distorting your product images. Many sites use small graphics that when clicked open to a larger view of the product.

Ordering System/Shopping Cart

Incorporate an ordering system that is easy to use to allow customers to pick and choose the products they want to order from your online catalog. To date, the most successful online shopping model is the shopping cart ordering system. The electronic shopping cart is modeled after the way most of us shop for groceries in the United States – with a cart that we fill with products as we push it around the store. The online shopping cart system allows customers to place items they choose into their own personal virtual shopping cart. When online customers are through shopping, they proceed to check-out where items are totaled, including shipping/handling and any other charges. If you are building your own web store, there are many software



packages available that utilize the shopping cart model. Shopping cart software ranges in price from free to thousands of dollars depending on the quality and functionality. Look for a fully integrated software package that takes the process all the way from product selection to order total.

Merchant Account/Payment Processing

Currently, credit cards are the quickest and most efficient way to accept payment for online purchases. The two ways for accepting credit cards for online purchases are manual processing and real time processing. In manual processing, the online customer enters the credit card number for payment of purchase. The information is sent to you and the transaction is processed by hand with a terminal keypad. You enter the numbers into the terminal where it then connects to a processing network and returns the status as approved or declined.

In real time processing, the customer enters the credit card number, and the transaction is processed entirely online. After the transaction has been completed, the processor will deposit the money from the transaction into your bank account. The process for accepting real time credit card payment via the Internet requires communication between your web store shopping cart and payment processor using your merchant account. It is critical that these functions are compatible with one another.

Either way, you need to set up the ability to accept credit card payments online by establishing a merchant account and a way to process payments. Without a merchant account, web businesses can't accept credit cards and may miss out on more than 60 percent of their sales opportunities. There are many services set up to do this for small e-tail businesses. Go to a search engine and type in "merchant account" and a long list of merchant account and processing service providers will come up. Compare and evaluate companies in terms of costs (set-up fee, per transaction fee, percentage of sales, monthly/annual fee), secure transactions, how long they have been in business, compatibility with your system, and the services they provide (an impartial listing of merchant account providers can be found at MerchantWorkz.com). It is easiest and simplest to go with a fully integrated service that provides you with the merchant account and payment processing at a secure location; however, this can be more expensive.

From a customer standpoint, having a secure site where they actually submit their credit card number is critical. This is done by using a SSL (Secure Socket Layer) server where the transactions take place. Insuring secure transactions is currently the number one customer issue when it comes to buying online. Experts say that you lose 50 to 60 percent of potential sales when you don't have a secure transaction site.

Customer Communication System

In addition to an ordering system, your web store needs to incorporate a way to communicate with customers. There should be a telephone number on each web page where customers can call with questions, and there should be an easily accessible e-mail system where customers can send questions. A recent study by Forrester indicated e-mail and the telephone were the most-used and the most-preferred form of contact, with e-mail ranking first. In both circumstances, it is key to customer satisfaction that someone be available to answer the questions in a timely matter — within 24 hours or less. Remember, your competition is just a click away!

The communication system you incorporate should have a mechanism that e-mails customers once they have placed an order, thanking them and letting them know when to expect shipment. A customer database can also be used to send customers information about new products, sales, etc. This communication system should be as automated as possible.



Tracking System

In addition to a communication system, the web store should incorporate a system that tracks each customer order from placement through delivery.

Web Server/Host

Once your e-tail web site is designed and ready to go, you must have a place for it to reside or an ISP (Internet Service Provider) to host it. The two basic choices are to purchase your own web server or “rent” space on a web server. The key word here is web server – not just any server will do. The first choice, buying your own server, can be costly both in initial hardware and software and in maintaining the system. If you don’t have the necessary skills, you will have to hire someone to set up and maintain your server for you, and that can be quite expensive. Most small businesses choose to rent space on a server. Either way, you will pay a monthly fee to an ISP to host your site or your server. It is important to start locating the ISP while you are working on your web store. Don’t wait until you have your web store done. Make sure that the service provider has adequate space, bandwidth, reliability, knowledge and capability to handle a transactional e-tail web site.

Outsourcing and Web Building/Hosting Services

At this point, if you have decided that you do not have the time, talent, staff or inclination to build your e-tail web site in-house, then do what many small businesses do and out-source it to a company or person with expertise in building web sites. Make sure that whoever you hire not only knows how to build web sites but also knows how to build e-tail web sites. There is a lot more to building a site for doing commerce on the Internet than building a personal web page or an informational web page for a business. Always take an online look at work they have done and evaluate it before you hire someone for your business. The cost to out-source your web site design will vary from a couple hundred dollars to thousands of dollars depending on the complexity of site, size of site, who you hire, and what you want done.

Another option – what some call the “one-stop” method of getting an e-tail web site up and going for minimal costs and in minimal time – is to use a web building/hosting service. These are services that take you through the entire process of setting up your web store starting with securing your domain name and going all the way through the marketing of the site. These companies provide templates for designing your web store, shopping cart software, forms, a place to host your site, a source for setting up a merchant account and processing, secure transaction locations, and more. Go to a search engines and type in “web hosting service” and a long list of web hosting service providers will come up. Compare and evaluate companies in terms of costs, services they offer and ease of use. This is a real option for many small businesses, especially those companies that don’t have a large number of different products to sell, have a small budget dedicated to this effort, or just want to start out on a small scale.

Design and Technical Considerations

There are many design and technical issues that need to be considered when designing a web site. The more knowledge you have before building your site, the better your site will be. The following are some of the more critical issues to consider:

- ❖ Bandwidth – bandwidth affects the speed with which a user can access the Internet. The dominant design criterion should be download speed in all web projects until about the year 2004. Design your web site for the masses aiming at optimal usability over a 56K modem. Apply the KISS rule to your web site – Keep It Short and Simple! The more you use large graphics, animation, video streaming, audio streaming and other multimedia design features, the slower the download time. Recommendations are to keep page



sizes (file sizes) below 50K to prevent loss of viewers [3]. Internet customers don't like to wait!

- ❖ Browser Compatibility – design your web site so that it looks good on all browsers. What looks okay on Netscape might not look okay on Internet Explorer or AOL browsers. And what looks okay on Explorer 6 might not look okay on Explorer 5.
- ❖ Color Palette – color configuration varies from computer to computer from multi-million color displays to 256-color and 16-color monitors. For consistence in graphical appearance, it is recommended using a 256-color/16-color default in your web design.
- ❖ Continuity – the overall look of the web site should be consistent from page to page. There should be a unified look and feel as the user navigates within the site. Pages should incorporate similar layout, logos, fonts, colors, styles, graphics, etc., creating a comfort factor and a sense of familiarity with customers.
- ❖ Frames – avoid using frames in the design of your site. Frames decrease the dynamic space you have to work with, thereby decreasing the amount of space for featuring products. They often present navigation problems for the user, some browsers cannot print framed pages accurately, and search engines have trouble with framed sites.
- ❖ Home Page – the most prominent design element on the home page should be the name and logo of the company. They should also appear in smaller scale on every page of the web site. In addition, a business web site should provide customers with a *brief* description of the business and available products. Briefly describe any unique aspects of your business from inception to the current operation to include unique manufacturing, service, distribution and other processes. This type of seemingly useless information provides your company the opportunity to differentiate itself from competing products. Be careful not to overdo it; too much seemingly useful information may actually become useless if you cannot retain the customer's interest.
- ❖ Navigation – use directories, site maps and navigation bars throughout your site. Be consistent in your format from page to page. The goal is to enable customers to move around your site with ease. No matter where a customer is on the site, they should be able to get wherever they want to go quickly. According to an internetday.com article, 20 to 40 percent of users don't purchase because they can't figure out how to easily move around the web site.
- ❖ Page Width – do not design for a specific screen width. Experts recommend creating page layouts that will work across a range of window sizes – a resolution-independent page or liquid layout that can adapt to anything from 620 to 1024 pixels. However, if this is not possible or you do choose to design for a specific size, at least for the immediate future stay with the current standard page size of 800 x 600 pixels. Currently, about 93 percent of the web population can view a page at 800 x 600 without unnecessary scrolling [11]. Taking into account the actual viewable browsing area, this means you would design pages that are about 770 x 430.
- ❖ Readability – design your site so that it is easy to read. The background should not impair the visitor's ability to read and see the information on the page. Use colors with high contrast between the background and text. For example, a black background with dark blue text can make reading extremely difficult. Don't use patterned backgrounds that interfere with the ability to read information and see products. Use fonts that people can see and read easily. Be brief, concise and succinct in your writing. Make your words count. Use short paragraphs and bulleted lists. The rule of thumb when writing for the web is to reduce by 50 percent the amount of text used to write the same material for print.



- ❖ Screen Compatibility – screen size and resolution vary from user to user. Design your web site so that it will look good on all screen sizes and screen resolutions.
- ❖ Text Only Default – a well-designed web site will include a text-only option that will display alternate information for browsers without graphics capability. In addition, a text-only version of your site makes it easier for visually impaired users to access your information with a talking browser that reads the text aloud.
- ❖ Accessibility – a web site should be designed so that it is accessible to people with disabilities. For example, consider the following design issues that affect web site accessibility:
 - The visually impaired use special readers that read only text.
 - Blinking text can trigger seizures in some visitors.
 - Poor color choices may render text unreadable to color blind visitors.
 - Mouse-dependent site navigation can be difficult for visitors with physical limitations.
 - Information contained in sound clips is inaccessible to hearing-impaired visitors.

Bobby is a web-based tool that analyzes web pages for their accessibility to people with disabilities. The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) offers *Bobby* as a free public service in order to further its mission to expand opportunities for people with disabilities through the innovative uses of computer technology. To analyze your web site, go to www.cast.org/bobby and type in the URL of the page that you want *Bobby* to examine and click submit. *Bobby* will display a report indicating any accessibility and/or browser compatibility errors found on the page. Additional information regarding accessibility for the disabled is available through the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI).

- ❖ User Interface – a web site must be easy to use, period. Ease of navigation is critical. And the easier and more logical you make this process on your site, the happier the user will be. Navigation interfaces need to help customers answer three fundamental questions relative to the web as a whole and relative to the site's structure [3]:
 - Where am I?
 - Where have I been?
 - Where can I go?

There are several excellent books on the market that address these issues and more:

- *Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity*, Jakob Nielsen
- *Homepage Usability: 50 websites Deconstructed*, Jakob Nielsen
- *Son of Web Pages That Suck*, Vincent Flanders

Site Marketing

“Build it and they will come!” They may, and then again, they may not. You must put some effort into marketing your e-tail web store. Many companies are not satisfied with their web site as a marketing and sales tool. It is not unusual for a business to expend significant resources constructing a professional web site only to leave it unattended. To make your web site work, it must be a critical part of your marketing plan and receive the same attention other components receive. The web site needs to be updated periodically and marketed continually to be successful. There are millions of web sites on the Internet, and without rigorous marketing, the chances of your site generating the desired level of customer traffic and/or sales is quite small.



The key is to get your site known so potential customers will come and take a look. There are several things that you can do to increase the hits on your site.

Submit your site to the “big” search engines (Yahoo!, Google, Alta Vista, Excite, Web Crawler, MSN, Infoseek, Lycos, Ask Jeeves, and HotBot). You need to be listed with the search engines because this is the number one way people find sites selling products they are interested in purchasing. It is estimated that 85 percent of all web users find sites via search engines [5]. To submit your site, go to the main page of the search engine and click the button for site submission. For example, yahoo.com has a “How to Suggest a Site” link at the bottom of their page that takes you to a page of instructions on how to do it. Most search engines require a fee to submit a business site. The cost is well worth the investment.

When you submit your URL to search engines, don’t expect your site to show up immediately. Some search engines take a while before your listing shows up. A month or so after submitting your URL to search engines and directories, check to make sure it is listed properly. Some search engines and directories have links that allow you to verify that your web site has been registered. Don’t stop there; it is important to frequently check on your web site pages as pages sometimes disappear, dead links may develop, or the page may be deleted from a search engine or directory catalog.

For optimal indexing of your web site by search engines, Dr. R. F. Wilson of Web Marketing Today recommends the following tags be incorporated into the web site coding:

- ❖ Write a Page Title. Write a descriptive title for each page of five to eight words. Remove filler words from the title, such as “the” and “and.” This page title appears on the web search engines when your page is found. Entice surfers to click on the title by making it a bit provocative. Hint: use some descriptive keywords along with your business name on your home page. Instead of “Acme Cutlery, Inc.” use “Acme Cutlery – Pocketknives, Butchering Sets and Kitchen Knives.” The more people see in the blue highlighted portion of the search engine that interests them, the more likely they are to click on the link.
- ❖ List Keywords. To get your juices flowing, sit down with some associates and brainstorm a list of 50 to 100 keywords or key phrases – the kind of words or phrases someone might search on to find a business or site like yours. Then refine the list to the most important 20 or so. Make sure you don’t repeat any word more than three times so you’re not penalized for “keyword spamming.”
- ❖ Write a Page Description. Select the most important 20 keywords, and write a careful 200 to 250 character (including spaces) sentence or two. Keep this readable but tight. Eliminate as many filler or throwaway words as you can (and, the, a, an, company, etc.) to make room for the important words, those keywords that do the actual work for you.

It is important to resubmit a web page after major changes have been implemented. By resubmitting the page, search engines and directories have the opportunity to index your new page. The new index may significantly impact your search engine results ranking or place the page in another category. Resubmitting a web site after significant changes have been made is one way to ensure that your site’s content is current within the various search engines and directories.

[Note: The following web sites have excellent information on the subject of web marketing via search engines, meta tags, etc. – searchenginewatch.com, searchengines.com and members.attcanada.ca/~lillyb.]

Reciprocal linking and cross promotion – if you provide a link to my site, I will provide a link to your site – is another way to increase traffic to your site. This takes full advantage of the way the web works. It is well known that word of mouth is a powerful form of advertising. With the web, verbal referrals are replaced with links or click referrals. A study by Forrester showed that 90 percent of satisfied online customers are likely to visit again and that 87 percent will tell friends and family about the site.



Affiliate programs are becoming an extremely good way to generate traffic and revenue. An affiliate program works like this: you sign up to become an affiliate of a company (for example, amazon.com) on the web. Once you become an affiliate and provide a link to their site, any time someone visits them via your link and makes a purchase, you receive a percentage of the sale. It costs you nothing to do this, and you can use an affiliate program to promote your own site. You would give affiliates a percentage of sales they generate by linking customers to you. Tracking is crucial to affiliate programs, and you would have to incorporate such a system into the design of your site if you go with this type of program.

Advertisements are another way to increase traffic and to generate revenue. You can purchase ad space on sites that receive a lot of traffic, hoping to capture potential customers to your site, or you can sell ad space on your site to others. Don't forget to include your URL or web address with your traditional forms of advertising and on all collateral business material such as radio, television, print, business cards, brochures, stationary, fax cover sheets, invoices, quotes, etc. *www.yourname.com* should be highly visible in all aspects of your business. Including your web address on all business material allows you to expose current and potential customers to your address. The key is to get your web address in front of as many people as possible.

The Bottom Line

The bottom line in business is, of course, profit – and profit from e-tail is achieved by:

- ❖ getting customers to come to your site,
- ❖ getting customers to make a purchase once they get to your site, and
- ❖ getting customers to return to your site and purchase again, and again, and again!

References

- [1] NUA Internet Surveys - <http://www.nua.ie/surveys>
- [2] U.S. Department of Commerce - <http://www.census.gov>
- [3] Dr. Jakob Nielsen - <http://www.useit.com>
- [4] CyberAtlas - <http://www.cyberatlas.internet.com>
- [5] Forrester - <http://www.forrester.com>
- [6] Jupiter Media Metrix - <http://www.jmm.com>
- [7] E-Commerce Times (S. Strauss) - http://www.ecommercetimes.com/small_business/strategy/strauss307.shtml
- [8] Terry Sullivan - <http://www.pantos.org/atw>
- [9] Keynote - <http://www.keynote.com>
- [10] E-Commerce Times (D. Cruse) - <http://www.ecommercetimes.com>
- [11] StatMarket - <http://www.statmarket.com>



For more information on e-commerce

BizReport - <http://www.bizreport.com>

CyberAtlas - <http://www.cyberatlas.internet.com>

ECG - <http://www.ecommerce-guide.com>

E-Commerce Times - <http://www.ecommercetimes.com>

EcomWorld - <http://www.ecomworld.com>

Forrester - <http://www.forrester.com>

IDC - www.idc.com

Internet Economy Indicators - <http://www.internetindicators.com>

InterNIC - <http://www.internic.net>

Jupiter Research - <http://www.jmm.com>

NUA Internet Surveys - <http://www.nua.net/surveys>

Search Engine Watch - <http://searchenginewatch.com>

searchengines.com - <http://www.searchengines.com>

StatMarket - <http://www.statmarket.com>

United States Census Bureau E-Commerce Retail Sales Statistics - <http://www.census.gov/mrts/www/current.html>

useit.com - <http://www.useit.com>

web Accessibility Initiative - <http://www.w3.org/WAI>



APPENDIX

