



Marketing 101

Exercising Your E-Commerce

by
Michelle Merlo, Managing Partner
Michelle Merlo Communications, LLC

If your company revolves around the sale of services or products, then the Internet should be claiming a key role in your annual business plan. Electronic commerce – or “e-commerce” – is simply the act of selling those services or products via the Internet. Brick and mortar storefronts are replaced with virtual shopping carts. However, the customers remain very real, whether your community is business-to-business or business-to-consumer, and therefore, the focus must remain on catering to your customer’s needs.

The benefits of ecommerce are numerous, but the most obvious is the 24/7 availability of your website sales pitch to be seen by prospects and returning customers. Online stores provide a platform for another company salesman – sans salary, benefits, expense reports and sick days! And, online sales are often quicker and more convenient than traditional, in-person transactions, creating more opportunities for better profit margins.

Chances are, your competitors are already selling online. The Census Bureau of the Department of Commerce released a report in June, which estimated \$31.7 billion in e-commerce sales were conducted in the first quarter of 2009 across the country, an increase of nearly one percent over the fourth quarter – the holiday season – of 2008.

Running an e-commerce store isn’t difficult. Getting it up and running, however, does require technical expertise to build the crucial steps of your store’s infrastructure. That job should be done by an experienced professional. If you need to outsource, look for a company with a track record of creating e-commerce systems. They should be able to give you examples of their work and references.

A fundamental e-commerce site includes:

- A user-friendly web site
- A trusted hosting agent
- A system to load and track product inventory
- A payment infrastructure that allows for real-time credit card processing
- A first-rate security system
- A promotional program

Web site: Be sure to get the visitor to where they want to go within three clicks. Go lightly on the bells and whistles. Think promotions from the outset and instead of telling your visitors how good your product is, offer testimonials, or quotes from satisfied customers. Third-party credibility sells product.

Hosting agent: There are several credible hosting agents that will keep your web site files on their equipment, or “servers” which is typically designed specifically for e-commerce sites. Note that the creator of your site and the hosting agent need not be the same company. Look for a host that has 24/7 support should your site need repair – and a 24/7 means of contact from you. And don’t be afraid to price-shop a bit. Monthly hosting fees should not be exorbitant. Under \$100 per month is reasonable.

Product Inventory: Selecting inventory depends on your customers. Pick your products to display according to what you believe your online visitors will want. Think about it through your customers' point of view, not yours. Your online store architect should give you lots of options, such as various ways to illustrate and describe your products and inventory control methods.

Payment Infrastructure: Your store must have a way to accept credit card payments immediately (you will hear your site developer calling it "in real-time"). You will need to set up a merchant account and an online payment gateway system. You can also choose to use the popular PayPal system made famous via Ebay. You'll also see your site developer create a "shopping cart" component as part of the payment infrastructure. The cart allows your customers to track what they are buying and lets you track your customers.

Security: If a customer believes his or her credit card info is at risk for being stolen while purchasing product on your site, they will leave immediately. Internet security is a must-have and is arguably the most important component of your e-commerce project. Look for your developer to walk you through the various security options, all of which should include Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) Certificates.

Promotions: The best site in the world will remain dormant if not found. Promotions pave the way to your homepage. Peddle your online store both online and offline for best results. Online tactics include "Search Engine Optimization," or creating your site content in a manner that allows for search engines to find it quickly, as well as online advertising. Offline tactics can be as simple as placing your web site address right next to your company name, all the time and everywhere (stationary, signage, ads, etc.).

The bottom line is this: E-commerce continues to grow and is predicted to continue at an accelerating pace. Don't get left behind. Plan now. Open your store, stay ahead of the curve...and sell product!

About the Author

A two decade, award-winning veteran of marketing and communications, Michelle works with organizations and companies of all shapes and sizes to help them implement marketing strategies to further their businesses. She can be reached at michelle@michellemerlo.com or 412-475-0425.