

E-Commerce Gets Your Message Out



e commerce



*"Communications is at the heart of e-commerce and community."
-Meg Whitman, former chairman and CEO of eBay*

BY KAREN HODGES MILLER

Communication is what the Internet is all about, and for any business today e-commerce plays an all-important role. We often relate the term e-commerce with retail businesses, from the giants of the industry such as eBay and Amazon to individual retailers selling in a niche market. But e-commerce means communicating your message to attract new customers, retain loyal product users and create brand awareness and is an important part of every business - no matter the size of the company or the product or service.

Local web developers agree that communication is at the heart of many of the latest developments in e-commerce, whether directly, through mobile communication, or indirectly, communicating a sense of trust in a company.

Mobile Communication. We are now able to communicate with each other at anytime and in anyplace. "The phone has almost become a bionic part of the human

body, and traditional applications are becoming mobile phone friendly," says Sam Giraffe of Giraffe Tech, LLC. Text messaging is a standard part of many of our lives these days and one way companies are taking advantage of that is through text advertising. "One way many companies - and consumers - are taking advantage of this is through using services that allow free text messaging if an advertisement is attached," he explains.

Personalized Advertising. Internet technology has made it easy for business to keep track of what their customers buy, and using that knowledge to make advertising more and more personal is another e-commerce trend, according to Meg Rosner, web development manager for Strand Management Solutions. Amazon.com, for example, sends personalized email updates to its customers about new book releases based on the customer's past purchases. For example, if you have purchased a book on sales and marketing, you will receive a newsletter updating you on new releases in

that category.

Many web retailers are taking that concept one step farther and recommending products based on what customers with a similar profile have also purchased. When you click on a particular book on Amazon, for example, you will see the phrase, "customers who purchased that book also purchased ..." with a list of related titles.

This type of marketing is actually a form of peer review, or even peer pressure, and e-commerce is taking peer marketing to even greater lengths.

Facebook Beacons. First came the social network sites such as Facebook and MySpace, aimed at making it easy for individuals to share personal thoughts, photos and messages. Companies quickly learned that a MySpace page was a great new way to get the word out about their company, particularly to the younger generation. But just having a MySpace page is now "so last year." The latest trend in combining social networking with e-commerce is Beacons. "Beacons are a program designed by Face-

book that allows businesses to let your friends know about purchases that you have made,” explains Giraffe.

Facebook announced in November that 44 websites had signed on to use Facebook Beacons “to allow users to share information from other websites for distribution to their friends on Facebook,” according to a press release from the company. For example, a Facebook user purchases a ticket from Fandango.com, a movie ticket purchasing site and Beacon participant. Fandango.com then sends a message to all of the friends on that customer’s Facebook site, announcing that they have purchased a ticket for a particular movie.

“Consumers gain a new way to tell their friends about their movie tastes, while Fandango is able to gain greater social distribution on Facebook,” according to the press release.

There are privacy issues related to this new form of marketing, according to Giraffe, and to avoid problems in that area Facebook allows its members to opt out of the program.

This type of marketing may not be to everyone’s tastes. “It is marketing using the ‘me too’ mentality, using envy and peer pressure as a marketing tool,” says

Giraffe. But like it or not, this latest trend is probably here to stay.

Peer Reviews. Another, and some might say more positive, form of peer pressure marketing is the peer review. “The customer voice is taking center stage in marketing on the internet,” says Rosner. It started with big-ticket items such as cars and appliances, but is now trickling down into even low priced merchandise, she adds.

The “information highway” makes it easy for consumers to give their opinions - both good and bad - about a product, and it also makes it easy for prospective customers to find out more about a product than the consumer fact sheet the company places on its web site.

Rosner gave an example of a purchase she recently researched. “My dog just tears threw chew toys, I was replacing them every few weeks. I bought one that the manufacturer promised was impervious, and he tore that up, too. I finally went on the Petco site and read some of the customer reviews. I found that other customers had also had problems with the toy I bought, and I also found the toy that customers said were indestructible. That’s the one I purchased.” The moral for business, she says, is it is no longer possible to just

make an unsubstantiated claim about a product. If your customers are dissatisfied they will use the Internet to let everyone know.

Customer Interaction. “Customers expect a more personal experience” when visiting a website these days, adds Rosner, even if they haven’t logged in or identified themselves on the site. Some sites allow a customer to have an online chat with a company representative; others allow the customer to click their way to greater levels of detail about a product. A furniture site, for example, allows a customer to click first for close-up views of a product, and then see it grouped with additional pieces that match or work together. Sephora, a cosmetics site, offers videos demonstrating how to apply their makeup. “The more information you can give a customer about the product the more likely they are to buy,” says Rosner.

Search Engine Optimization. If they can’t find you, they can’t buy from you. “Users are getting savvier in how they use search engines,” says Matt Dawson, CEO of Image Cog. “Now, instead of just searching for a widget, they search for ‘widget painter in Trenton, NJ.’” The result is that it is easier for a business to get to the top of the appropriate search engine



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page. “Instead of 15,000 responses, you now may get 20, but they are more relevant,” he adds. This also means that a business must make sure that once the customer finds its site that the content is interesting, informative and relevant. “Content is king. As searches become more and more relevant it is less important that you rank at the top of the page and more important that you compare well to the other sites on your page,” says Dawson.

A New Level of Comparison. Search engines are not the only reason that customers are taking comparison-shopping to new heights. “The primary device for viewing the Internet is still the computer monitor, and monitors are getting larger,” says Dawson. That means that it is easy for consumers to place two sites on their screen at once for one-on-one comparisons. “Users will start using their new found real estate to view multiple sites side by side. We know that users already compare directly the attractions of one site to another,” he adds.

Personalized URLs. The increased specificity of searches has brought about another new trend in e-commerce, says Jeff Barnhart, president and CEO of Creative Marketing Solutions, personalized URLs, or website addresses. For example, instead of a pharmaceutical company having only one site, which includes information about each of its products, it will now have separate sites specifically devoted to each drug. If a person types the name of the drug into the search engine they will come to a site, which strictly features information on that one drug and the diseases and symptoms it is used for.

More Security. As Internet users we all want to be safe, and business owners must remember that when developing their own websites. “Online security, making sure your information is protected against everything from credit card fraud to spam, is a very important issue,” says Barnhart. “Make sure your customers know that you are using good encryption.” Name brand recognition with the preeminent services such as VeriSign or Authorize.net give credibility to your site.

Shopping Carts. No, website shopping carts aren’t new. What is new, however, is tracking why people abandon those carts before completing a purchase to increase the number of completed sales on a website. “People abandon a cart because they are frustrated,” says Rosner. There can be many reasons for that feeling of frustration, but it all boils down to they don’t like the options you’ve given them,

she adds. Sometimes the forms are too complex; sometimes people don't like the choices they have for making a purchase—for example, if a site only takes MasterCard and the user has American Express. One of the easy ways around this problem is PayPal, another old favorite that is coming up with new and ever easier ways to enable e-

commerce. "Even if you just have one product to sell you can use PayPal and other similar products to create a tiny virtual store on any website," she says.

All of the new trends in e-commerce help businesses to communicate more effectively with their customers, showing professionalism, information, innovation

and trust. The bottom line in e-commerce, as in traditional business, is customer loyalty. While the today's trend may be tomorrow's old school technique, in the end, communicating effectively with customers will never go out of style. ■

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Web Browsing / Email

Safeguard your Internet Privacy

Browsing the Internet can be dangerous without adequate protection. If you wish to safeguard your privacy, use online anonymous browsing services. Without anonymous browsing, your web browsing habits can be easily tracked and your privacy compromised. Ever wonder why you get travel ads on non-travel related websites when you visit Expedia.com or other travel sites? It's because cookies reveal your past browsing history. Anonymous services can also protect you from spyware and web-based viruses. Online banking usually works with these services, although sometimes you may have to disable it to use online banking. One possible such service is www.anonymizer.com which hides your true identity from the website you visit.

Sam Giraffe, Giraffe Tech LLC - www.giraffetech.com

Email Shortcuts

Here's something you might not have known you can do with shortcuts. Got one or more people you email all the time? Create a shortcut to send them an email. One click of the shortcut and your default mail program will open up a message to that person, pre-addressed and ready to send. To make an email shortcut right click an empty area of the desktop or folder where you wish to create the shortcut and hit 'new\shortcut.' Once the shortcut wizard comes up, type 'mailto:(the email address you want to send to).' Click 'next' and give the shortcut a name. From now on, clicking your new shortcut will open up an email to that recipient.

Michael DeCamillis, Dolvin Consulting - www.dolvin.com

MS Power Tips

Windows Updates

Depending on your settings, Windows XP may routinely activate the Windows Update feature to scan for and download updates to Windows XP automatically. If you have a fast Internet connection, and usually don't remember to check for updates yourself, you'll probably want this feature turned on. However, if you already check for updates, and would rather not have your work interrupted, you'll probably want to disable automatic updating by right clicking on My Computer and turning off the updates under the Automatic Updates tab. Disabling updates can have security implications though, since you will not automatically get the latest security updates.

Jonathan B Bayer, Bayer Technology Group - www.bayertechnologygroup.com

Computers & Hardware

Play nice with older Office versions

Because not everyone immediately updates their software when a new version is released, you may expect to run into problems when sharing 2007 documents with those using Word 2003 or earlier. Luckily, Microsoft anticipated this and included functionality to ensure that 2007 documents play well with others: Compatibility Mode and the Compatibility Checker. When you open a Word document created in an earlier version in 2007, Word automatically switches to Compatibility Mode in which Word turns off the options that only work with 2007. For instance, you can't apply a 2007 document Theme to a document running in Compatibility Mode. If you create a document in 2007 from scratch but need to share it with others using earlier versions, you can turn on the Compatibility Checker to find out exactly which features you'll lose in translation. To run the checker, click the round Microsoft Office button at the very top-left of your Word window, then select Prepare | Run Compatibility Checker. You'll instantly see a summary of items that Word must alter when you save the document to an earlier version.

Adam Goldstein, ATech Services LLC - www.atechsvcs.net

Stable Internet Connection

If you end up rebooting your cable or DSL modem every few weeks, consider moving other electronic equipment away from the modem. Wireless routers placed next to modems can sometimes cause signal interference with the modem, causing the modem to lock up and requiring you to reboot both devices. Moving one device at least six feet away from the other will often get rid of this problem.

Arnold Rosner, Strand Management - www.strandmanagement.com