

## ***Bricks & Clicks:***

# **Building an e-Commerce Site That Builds Your Walk-In Trade, Too**

*by Bill Camarda*

Today's small business retailers are a tough bunch. They've absorbed the blows of regional malls, catalog shopping, and "category killer" megastores. And, contrary to the doomsayers, they'll survive E-commerce, too. But it's not just about survival. The smartest, most creative small businesses will use the Web to compete more effectively than ever before... and even to drive traffic to their storefronts!

In this article, I'll give you 8 great low-cost or no-cost ideas for making your e-commerce site a success -- and for using the Web and your storefront to support *each other*.

### **#1. Make sure your site visitors know you're local, local, *local!***

You've got something the Microsofts and AOLs of the world can't buy: *roots*. Use 'em! Start by making sure your Web site prominently displays your location, phone number, and other business contact information. You'd be amazed how many sites don't! Make sure your Web designer includes your town, county, and state in your "metatags" -- the hidden information many search engines use to figure out what kind of site you've got. You may not be the only "Sweet Nothings" chocolate shop on Earth, but you're the only one in *your* neck of the woods... and many potential customers will narrow their search by geography. (Nobody wants to drive to Outer Mongolia for chocolate!)

Are you a member of the member of the local BBB? Say so on your site. Does your local C-of-C have a Web page? Make sure it links to you (and link back to theirs, too.) In a recent Web marketing survey, links from related sites were the #1 generator of traffic -- more than banner ads, search engine listings, junk email, or anything else.

Your community is full of local Web sites to link with. Sponsor a Little League team? Ask them to link to you on the site where they post the scores. (They don't have a site? Sponsor a page on *your* site -- you'll draw traffic from every athlete's family in town.) Do your own search for sites in your town, make a list of potential links, and offer to trade. (Tip: Use **www.google.com**, a search engine that actually *works* -- what a concept.)

### **#2. Piggyback on your existing advertising and promotion -- it's free!**

Make sure your retail customers know you're on the Web. Start by adding your site to all your existing promotions. Hey, you're already paying for them -- why

not get double-duty out of them? (And whenever there's space, also give people a reason to visit: "*Visit us at [www.mycompany.com](http://www.mycompany.com) for a special Web-only offer!*" Mention your site at the point of purchase, and in your...

- \* Fliers (in fact, print a special one that tells people what's on your site for *them* -- and stuff one in the bag with every purchase)
- \* Print ads & mailers
- \* Radio spots
- \* Press releases (and, by all means, create a release to announce your Web site and its customer benefits)
- \* Store window
- \* Bags
- \* Cash register receipts (if you can't program your site name into your cash register, get an old-fashioned hand stamp!)

### **#3. Promote an in-store special on your Web site...**

Whether you're taking orders on the Web or not, make sure your home page includes an additional "in-store-only special" or coupon that visitors can print out and walk in with. And if you are doing "shopping-cart-and-credit-card" transactions on the Web, make sure your confirmation page includes some kind of bonus for stopping by. "*Thanks for your order. We'd love to meet you in person, too! Next time you're in the neighborhood, stop by with a printout of this receipt page, and we'll give you a free bonus gift...*"

The trick here -- as with everything on the Web -- is to keep current. Be realistic: if you can only update your site once a quarter, create a promo that lasts all quarter. Then put a tickler item on your calendar to do an update a couple of weeks before your promotion expires. The Web's full of promotions that ended six months ago. That's *death* -- the Web equivalent of the store with cobwebs in every corner and brown, vintage newspaper clippings on every wall. Oh, and by the way -- make sure everyone working in your store knows about your Web promotion!

### **#4...and promote a Web-only special in your store**

Turnabout is fair play, but this one's a little trickier. Some of your less "digital" customers might want to know why they have to go on the Web to get something, when they're already standing right in front of you, in your store. Here's *one* solution: unless you're selling headstones, it's best to make your Web promotion *fun*.

For example, if you sell children's books, do the publishers offer a few sample puzzles and games you can post on your site? Or, how about a Web scavenger hunt: the first to find 10 clues you've hidden around your site gets a free "whatever"? (Better yet, team up with other merchants for a "town-wide" Web scavenger hunt that builds traffic for everyone!)

## **#5. Leverage your partners and vendors for *all* they're worth.**

I've already mentioned the importance of establishing all the *local* links you can - with other local businesses, organizations, and non-profits. But you've got other partners who ought to be linking with you. For example, let's say you sell high-end audio equipment. Chances are, most equipment manufacturers have sites with pages that list their resellers. Are your links there? Is your information accurate and up-to-date? Is there an opportunity to add more information? Use it. It's free. (Speaking of freebies, are you using all your co-op money? If not, you might be able to apply it to banner advertising nowadays -- find out!)

Partners and vendors can be a great source of *content*, too. Depending on what you're selling, you might be able to provide product data sheets, white papers, links to instruction manuals, technical support, and other resources. In effect, you become a Web "portal" to information about the types of products you offer - and not just from one manufacturer, but from *all* of them. That's the kind of value that strengthens your reputation, attracts customers from beyond your local area, and might even enable you to charge a few kopeks more -- *eventually!*

## **6. Leverage the mass audiences that already exist.**

Consider selling via auction sites and affiliate programs. For example, if you sell camping equipment, you can set up your own branded "bookstore" specializing in books about camping. You link to [barnesandnoble.com](http://barnesandnoble.com); they sell the books and handle the transactions, and you get a commission. Also consider innovations like Amazon.com's Z-Shops, which allows you to sell on Amazon's own site, using Amazon's tools for credit card ordering. (More information:

**<http://s1.amazon.com/exec/varzea/subst/home/fixed.html>**)

## **#7: Re-use goes both ways!**

You've probably realized you can "re-purpose" your existing print materials for your Web site (though *do* try to reduce the amount of text, and add more bullet points for fast online skimming). But why not crib your Web copy and graphics for your *off*-line marketing, too? For instance: you sell gourmet food and utensils. You've been doing a "recipe of the month" on the Web all year. In November, you turn those recipes into a 12-month print calendar for the following year, and hand them out to customers with a qualifying purchase. Tip: Make sure whoever's creating your Web site graphics also keeps a high-resolution copy, in a format designed for print, such as "EPS" or "TIF". Otherwise you might find yourself printing graphics that look fuzzy, even though they looked great online.

## **#8: Ask for the bookmark!**

You don't want people to visit your site once: you want them to come back *again and again*. But it never occurs to many Web users to bookmark sites for easy re-

visiting. *Remind* them. (Just as many customers never get around to signing on the dotted line until you ask them!) If your audience tends toward novice-level, you might even tell them how. In Internet Explorer: "Right-click, then choose Create Shortcut." In Netscape: "Click Bookmarks, then click Add Bookmark."

Remember that musical number from *Oklahoma*: "The Farmer and the Cowboy Should Be Friends?" (Before your time? Lucky you!) Well, the e-commerce Webmaster and the small business proprietor should be friends, too. Use the Web to strengthen your "bricks-and-mortar" establishment. Use your store to strengthen your Web presence. It'll take time and patience, but it doesn't have to cost much -- and if you do it right, the Web might just be the best thing that ever happened to you.