

# Merchandising on the Web and Off

By Marcia Yudkin

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Now that I have several new products coming out in succession, I've been thinking a lot about how best to feature them at my Web site. My thoughts have turned to how supermarkets and department stores highlight certain products, and I've found useful analogies between catching the attention of a customer wheeling a cart up and down the aisles and a shopper on the Web.

Here are some merchandising techniques you'll find in bricks-and- mortars stores and their counterparts on the Web:

1. New products. In stores, these often smack you in the eye when you first walk in. On the Web, popular sites feature new products in a prominent spot on the home page.
2. Seasonal items. My local supermarket places these at the ends of the aisles and in a special interior aisle set aside for barbecue supplies in summer, Halloween candy in fall and rock salt in winter. On the Web, they often are featured on the home page but not centrally, getting less of a spotlight than the new products.
3. Combinations of items. In department stores, you'll often see signs saying, "Buy three for only \$25." Amazon.com is currently promoting book titles in this way, bundling two related titles together for an appealing discount, making sales of those items jump.
4. Non-traditional combinations. In supermarkets, instead of simply putting fruit with fruit and condiments with condiments, this involves putting caramel and piecrusts next to the apples and lemons on top of the fish counter. On the Web, this seems feasible at sites selling more than one kind of merchandise.

5. Add-ons. In supermarkets and department stores, these are the impulse items near the checkout counters, and in shops with personal service, it's the sales person asking, "Would you like a tie to match?" Again, I haven't seen this implemented on the Web, but it seems as if it could be programmed into the shopping process.

6. Customer mailings. At a lot of stores, you can sign up to get notice by postcard of upcoming sales. The online counterpart is pretty common, as with e-mails about cheap flights for the coming weekend.

7. Loyalty programs. Here a department store promises 10 percent off today if you sign up for our store charge card. A supermarket offers a free Thanksgiving turkey if you spend more than \$X,000 all year. Bonuses for buying frequently work well online too because they can easily be automated.

8. Ads. You'll often see inserts in the local paper announcing the week's specials at supermarkets. Online, the equivalent would be banner ads or ads in ezines announcing promotional prices for a limited time.

David Weltman of Future Now puts it this way: "Merchandising is making sure awareness of your product or service breaks the preoccupation of your shopper and becomes part of his or her buying process." I'd amend that slightly, because good merchandising doesn't always interrupt the shopper's absorption. Put the right item in the right place in your store or Web site and it smoothly becomes part of the shopper's experience. Ka-CHING!

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