

E-commerce and Brand Integrity

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In the current economy, where marketing budgets are tight and ROI is king, each aspect of marketing is expected to pull its own weight. As Internet marketing comes under scrutiny, and companies look to squeeze greater ROI out of their websites, e-commerce is often seen as the e-savior. But if a list of products and a shopping cart icon is the sum total of your e-commerce plan, you might be doing more harm than good.

Often, companies that turn to e-commerce to boost website ROI make the mistake of trying to do it quickly and cheaply, approaching e-commerce with a "something is better than nothing" attitude. They assume that even a stripped-down e-commerce engine will generate a hand-full of online sales, and that this narrow approach will have no adverse side effects on their company. Believe me, half-@ssing e-commerce with an eye to quick, effortless sales can have serious repercussions that are anything but virtual. In fact, companies that are unable or unwilling to give e-commerce its due would be better served having no on-line sales at all: a "nothing is better than something" approach, so to speak.

For your prospects and your customers, every aspect of your website has a definite impact on how your company is perceived. For your prospects, your website might be the first and only aspect of your company that they will see. To them the way you sell online is the way you sell, period. For your customers, a bad e-commerce experience will feel no different than a bad experience with your sales staff, your support, or your product. If your site's visitors don't feel comfortable buying from you online, odds are they won't be buying from you at all. The end result: short-term revenue losses and long-term brand erosion.

There are many reasons why people might not want to buy from your site, each of which ultimately detracts from your brand:

1. Your store-front is poorly designed. The worst time for a visual letdown is when a prospect is considering becoming a customer. Spend the time and the money to keep the look and feel of your e-store consistent with the rest of your site.
2. You have little, no, or poor ad copy. All of the tactics you employ to sell in the "real world" apply in cyberspace. If you're not selling your product on-line the way you would sell it in person, your visitors won't buy it on-line.
3. People don't feel secure when purchasing from your site. Reassure your visitors that their

transactions are safe and that you guarantee their satisfaction. Give them a number to call if they have any questions and follow up with your customers immediately after they've placed an order.

4. You don't tell people about your business. Surfers become customers only if they feel comfortable with a company. Tell people about your mission, your history, your staff, your clients, and anything else that says who you are and why people should do business with you.

5. You don't give multiple ordering options. Allow your customers to choose how they wish to pay, and how they wish to receive shipments.

6. You use a 3rd party payment vendor. Companies like Paypal are convenient, but if they're pulling your customers to their payment website and sending bills to your clients on their letterhead, you are taking the risk of disorienting your customers and appearing as though you've chosen to neglect them the moment they clicked "submit order."

7. You don't guide visitors through your online buying process. This is an extremely vital step that we will talk about in next month's Tips and Tactics. It has to do with transitioning your sales to cyberspace, knowing what your clients want, what they need, and how to sell it to them – online.

If you look closely, you will see that each of these issues comes down to one simple concept: looking at e-commerce not through your own eyes, but through your customers' eyes. If you design your e-commerce engine to meet your customers' unique needs, if you run your Internet sales the way you run your brick and mortar sales, and if you strive to make your visitors' e-experience pleasurable and secure, you will find success in e-commerce. If you're not ready to think beyond the "me," then you're not ready to think beyond the "e-."

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