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eCommerce and Your Strategic Web Presence

By: Susan Murphy

Just when you thought you have mastered the secrets of success of the internet, the eCommerce world is making dramatic changes. By understanding and incorporating the latest Web 2.0 technology such as RSS, blogs, podcasts and social networking you can dramatically improve your web presence by capitalizing on untapped on-line markets.

Compare today with websites of the year 2000. The Web 1.0 - or the web as we know it - focused primarily on products, price, search engine listings and key words to generate traffic to a specific site. That's changed dramatically in 2007 with the explosive growth of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is not a fad - it is changing the way your eCommerce site is found around the globe. The key to Web 2.0 is social networking or user generated content and it must be an integral segment of your web design. To drive traffic, businesses must now think beyond the product or service offered. They must think in terms of social networking brought about by web sites like MySpace, YouTube and LinkedIn. The practice of consumers posting; talking; sharing thoughts and reviews among like minded individuals is the new key to driving traffic to your web site. It's about creating a buzz for your products and services. It's a virtual referral system through word of mouth marketing over the web. It harnesses the basic network aspect of the Internet to rapidly reach large numbers of people. To have a strategic web presence, businesses must incorporate viral marketing into their eCommerce technology plans.

Viral techniques should be implemented throughout seven steps. The quality and number of visitors to your site, the conversion rate to one of your business goals; the practice of obtaining and analyzing data from traffic on your site will result in a better return on investment.

The seven steps to a strategically successful web presence

The first step is **discovery**. Location, location, location is not just true only in a traditional bricks and mortar storefront. Your strategic web location must be easy to find and targeted. Whether you are selling to consumers or businesses the buyer of your goods and services must be able to find your location. If you're a traditional retailer looking to expand your market potential online, you may consider syndicating your products onto Amazon.com and Yahoo! or Ebay. These sites enable on-line and off-line merchants to sell their products online. While leveraging other larger players for on-line product placement is important, nothing takes the place of your own web site. Many companies can help you either get started or take your web presence to the next level such as, Vertex Internet, a Lancaster County-based web site development company that specializes in eCommerce.



Search for Broadband Availability

<http://www.newpa.com/broadbandSearch.aspx>



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Request Broadband Service

Bona Fide Retail Request Program
(BFRR)

This consists of a program developed and implemented by participating Incumbent Local Exchange Carriers (ILECs) in order to attract and aggregate requests for services.

<http://www.newpa.com/default.aspx?id=240>

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The second step is the **research stage**. Recognize that more consumers are using the Internet for research prior to any purchasing decision. They may be using your web site to research a future purchasing decision at a retail store. When designing your site, keep in mind how consumers may research products and prices prior to making a buying decision and how you should design and manage your site to optimize on these searches. Remember, the availability of information consumers have today is a lot greater than just a few years ago.

The third step is the **comparison stage**. The buyer is saying, "I'm ready to buy." To optimize your web presence, you should be listed with Google's free comparison shopping site called Google Product Search or other competitive shopping engines such as PriceGrabber.com. It's free for any company to upload a product master data file to Google and they will index it. Review your site construction. Do you offer side by side product comparisons? Do you allow tagging, creating smart lists and wish lists so that it is easy for potential buyers to come back to your site?

Step four is the **Purchase**. Every business with a web presence must plan for maintaining security and providing safe transactions; safeguarding billing information; allowing for secure credit card payments. After the transaction, how will the purchase be fulfilled? Do you need to ship by common carrier, shipping companies or the postal service? Once a product is shipped, how will you track orders and confirm orders were received? These are things you need to embrace and think about.

Step five is **Service**. Businesses must have a service plan for an on-demand society where consumers expect much faster turn around times. How easy was the process for the buyer in terms of navigation, security and delivery? Does your website allow for such things as referrals and customer satisfaction surveys?

Step six is **Retention**. Forrester Research has been reporting that customer retention is at a five year low – brought on primarily because switching to competitors is one click away. Viral marketing can contribute to the loss of customer base or create a new excitement through referrals. Companies need to understand how to implement retention programs. Implementing an email marketing program is a perfect way to increase your customer retention rate by touching customers through a relevant and meaningful dialogue via email. Your company email newsletter can contribute to buzz that will drive traffic to your website.

The seventh step is **Optimization**. You need to track everything you do from referral source to conversion. Understand how you can optimize referral sources that are your best performers. Get help from Google Analytics – it provides free web site visitor tracking and analysis services to give you a deeper understanding of where your website traffic is coming from and what visitors are looking at on your site. The service will show key words by source as well as ROI by key word. Since your main goal is to acquire, maintain and grow your customer base tools like Google Analytics must be incorporated into your plan and site design.

For more information on eCommerce, visit <http://www.paecomm.org> to view our webinar on this and other related business topics.

The webinar was presented by Vertex Internet and Northern Tier Regional Planning and Development Commission.

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Tools and Techniques

Search engines: You can't ignore search engines such as Yahoo, MSN and Google. All the major search engines offer two ways to be found - free "organic listings" and paid "per click" listings. Pay per click advertisements which Google calls AdWords may range from 25 cents to \$25 per click depending upon the popularity of the keywords. For companies looking to maximize their organic search exposure, we recommend that you take a close look at your in-bound links. In-bound links are the number of links from other websites that point to your site. To find out how many in-bound links are pointing to your website, go to Google and type `link:www.(yourdomainname).com`. You can measure your organic search effectiveness by the number and quality of the in-bound links.

Customer Reviews contribute to viral marketing. It can create a buzz - good or bad. It's user generated content that builds on the concept that people are more apt to take the word of other people than of the on-line merchant. Web 2.0 indexes key words and drives traffic to your site. It can be extremely beneficial in targeting the right product or service to the right person or group resulting in an increase in ROI. This is how strategic web presence is shifting from the product to the social, in other words having the product well liked and represented by the right people or groups. Large companies are leveraging this social "chat" to drive traffic and increase sales - making the link between like minded people.

Putting the eCommerce Pieces Together

It's been said that opportunity rides on the wings of change. There has never been a more rich opportunity than today to take advantage of some of the new and exciting options in the world of eCommerce. The dynamic nature of the web has created new opportunities and leveled the playing for merchants large and small. In order to maximize these opportunities, companies need to embrace the eCommerce lifecycle by paying attention to how they drive new customers to their websites as well as merchandise the products, transact orders and retain their customers.



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Visit www.northerntier.org for information on loans and grants for small businesses



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Vertex Internet is a web applications development and web hosting company. The company hosts over 1,000 websites, manages 30 web servers and sends over 15 million permission-based emails each month.

Based in historic downtown Lititz, PA the company was founded in 1996. Sensing a growing opportunity for hosting transactional web sites, company principal Ross Kramer started Vertex Internet in his dorm room while still a sophomore at Penn State.

Together with his father, Howard Kramer, also a principal, they have grown Vertex Internet to include a staff of 12. The company manages accounts ranging from Fortune 500 companies to local small businesses. Vertex Internet's core competencies include developing custom eCommerce and eBusiness web applications, web application hosting and email marketing.

In 2001 Vertex Internet commercialized their flagship email marketing product, Listrak. Under development since 1999, Listrak is an Application Service Provider offering permission-based email marketers an integrated suite of tools to manage, send and track their email campaigns.



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Listrak delivers true email marketing intelligence that leading national marketers have come to rely on to launch highly targeted email campaigns that increase revenue, deepen customer relationships, and increase sales leads.

Listrak's email marketing services and hosted application make it easy to create measurable, cost effective campaigns, and its flexible and intuitive web-based user interface is simple to use. Listrak clients include Motorola, L'Oreal, The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Royal Bank of Scotland, Gannett Newspapers, and PR Newswire as well as a host of other firms utilizing Listrak to maximize their permission-based opt-in email marketing efforts. Listrak was founded in 2001 and is based in Lititz, Pennsylvania. More information can be found at www.listrak.com.