



Working the Web

Ellie Becker and Bernadette Nelson | February 2011

Attention Retailers: Should your next location be on the Web?

The fastest retail sales growth is not happening on Main Street or at the mall.

According to ecommerce tracker comScore, Inc., non-travel online spending reached a record \$32.6 billion during November-December 2010, up 12% from 2009. Yet, overall U.S. retail sales, excluding automobiles, rose only 5.5% in a similar comparison, according to MasterCard SpendingPulse.

If your retail business has weathered the recession, perhaps the best way to make up for the tough years is to consider expanding your business to the Web. Ecommerce offers a growth opportunity that might not otherwise be realistic here in Fairfield and Westchester Counties.

Despite lower commercial real estate rates these last few years, great retail locations can still be prohibitive. Then add build-out, inventory and staff salaries. A second bricks-and-mortar store is out of reach for many businesses.

For often a small fraction of that cost, many retailers are successfully expanding their reach, offerings and revenues on the Internet. Even better, their online businesses are driving more sales for their land-based locations.

And, in the same ways that they've always excelled – great service -- small e-tailers consistently beat out big competitors, according to ResellerRatings.com, a top destination for consumer reviews of online shopping experiences.

Getting Started

In many ways starting an ecommerce division is starting a whole new business – rather than cloning an existing one. So, consider getting professional help. First answer key questions about competition, product offerings, naming and brand identity, website technology, marketing and fulfillment.

Freedom to Re-invent

Although ecommerce has been around for quite awhile, there's plenty of room for new e-tailers. Surprisingly, there are merchandise gaps that you can fill – or lighter competition than you'd imagined for items in your inventory.

Since you're not a big, national brand and potential new customers in California aren't familiar with your store, you can consider a new name – with an available url -- and fresh brand identity for ecommerce. On the About Us page you can share your history and business experience.

Use the right technology

While ecommerce plug-ins are available for some web platforms, we recommend starting from scratch with one of the robust ecommerce software packages designed for small businesses. We like Volusion, which is affordable and highly rated. BigCommerce, goEmerchant, 3DCart and others are also well rated.

These packages provide robust features on a par with big-company sites, while automating the process. They are largely template driven, which means some design limitations.

Since it's hard to predict volume, you can start by fulfilling orders in-house and move to a specialized fulfillment house as volume exceeds your ability to fill orders.

Inbound Marketing for Ecommerce

To launch and market your ecommerce site, the rules and tools of inbound marketing, including SEO and analytics, will serve you well. Nothing nurtures online prospects and keeps buyers coming back better than offering them useful content, engaging them in discussion and making them part of your online community.

Social media is proven for turning customers into ambassadors, making special offers and rewarding loyalty. It's also important to budget for focused pay per click or Facebook advertising and local and industry PR.

Is there a virtual ribbon-cutting in your future?

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