

Marketing Your Retail Business on the Internet

How important is internet marketing for your business?

A well-designed website, with effective photographs and concise, well-written, useful text content, can be your most effective marketing tool, especially when combined with traditional advertising. It's easily updated and virtually unlimited in content capacity, so you can use less expensive traditional ads to drive traffic to your website. A poorly designed, written or marketed website is better than none, but it's a missed opportunity, nonetheless. Consider the following findings and projections:

- E-commerce sales have shown steady growth from 1999 through the third quarter of 2007 (the most recent period for which data is available).¹
- Estimated third quarter 2007 e-commerce sales increased 19.3% from the third quarter of 2006, while, during the same period, total retail sales increased 3.8%. (From the same report)
- Roughly ¾ of American households have internet access of some sort, according to a Pew Internet & American Life Project report from August, 2007.²
- Nearly ½ of American households subscribe to broadband access. The number of households was projected to top 50% by the end of 2007. (From the same report)

These findings demonstrate the growing importance of the internet in business. The US Department of Commerce 2005 final report on e-commerce³ states that e-commerce sales in the manufacturing sector accounted for more than a quarter of that sector's total sales. Missing in the statistics is the impact of the internet on retail sales of people who make their buying decisions online, but make the actual purchase by other means.

How can you make sure your internet marketing plan is effective?

If you've already got a website for your business, or you've decided that it's time to launch one, how can you better your competitive odds?

- Content, well-conceived, logically arranged and attractively presented, is key. For e-commerce sites, security of personal information is critical. It's likely that the sectors that have been shown to be most effective for e-commerce succeed due to a heightened sense of trust. Cultivate trust in your shopping process with a proven secure payment gateway or offer a range of methods of doing business. Check out the competition. The internet knows no boundaries. Your site should stand up to comparison with sites from any part of the country or any sector of the market.
- Don't assume everyone has the same internet service you do. As the statistics show, a growing number of households have broadband access – you should assume that your target audience may have it too. On the other hand, it's dangerous to have a site that's so content-rich, Job-like patience is required for a dial-up user to experience it.
- Make sure your site is designed with search engine optimization features.
- Study your website's statistics report. Hosting services often include these. They can help you determine how your site visitors are finding you, as well as tell you basic information, such as traffic and trends.

¹ Quarterly Retail E-Commerce Sales Report - 3rd Quarter 2007; US Department of Commerce (<http://www.census.gov/mrts/www/data/pdf/07Q3.pdf>)

² "Why It Will Be Hard to Close the Broadband Divide"; John Horrigan, August 1, 2007

³ 2005 E-commerce Multi-sector Report (May 25, 2007); US Department of Commerce (<http://www.census.gov/eos/www/2005/2005reportfinal.pdf>)