

eBiz Insider

the magazine for e-commerce professionals.



Managing Virtual Employees

—By Donna Talarico

- ◆ **Holiday Year-End Review**
- ◆ **Winning Strategies to Keep Your Customers Coming Back**
- ◆ **Misspelled Keywords = Captured Sales**

Read this issue and resolve to have a year of e-commerce success. Or, skip it. You probably won't lose the weight either...

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From the Editor



By Scott Sanfilippo,
Editor in Chief

The new year is finally here and like most of you, I'm making a list of resolutions I will probably NEVER keep. Come on, really now, how many times have you resolved to lose weight or stop smoking?

Forget those dead-end deceptions and make some resolutions that will really benefit your business:

Redesign your website: A website should be updated at least every 18 months, so if your site is "stale" resolve to give it a facelift. You will be surprised to find that a redesign increases sales (it's why bricks-and-mortar stores redesign their spaces regularly). Most web design firms get busy with the new year, so start discussing your redesign plans now and book time to have the work done.

Launch an additional store: Look at what you're currently selling and see if you can segment some of those products into a niche category and set up a separate store for them. In the world of the Internet, niche marketing works. In fact, the internet is ALL niche marketing. Trust me; I sold ferret supplies online for 13 years!

Fine tune your search marketing efforts: If you're managing your own search marketing campaigns, take a look at what you're spending and whether those campaigns are profitable. SEM is important! If you don't have the time to do it right, look at outsourcing to a qualified search marketing firm.

Communicate with your customers: If you're not in regular contact with your customers, you're doing yourself a disservice. Constant contact with your customers through e-mail, snail mail or phone is an important part of doing business. Start an e-mail newsletter, do a postcard with a special offer, or do an outbound telephone campaign just to say hello.

We're all in business to make money, right? Plan some new initiatives for the new year, so that when this time rolls around next year, you'll be saying "I'm glad I made those resolutions last year!"

Finally, take a minute to raise a glass of the old bubbly, salute the times to come and offer a toast to the new year. May it be filled with happiness, joy and plenty of e-commerce success!

Cheers! **eBiz**

Fill out our reader survey on page 23 or online at <http://survey.ebizinsider.com>



I want to thank you for the article on Selecting an SEO Firm in the November issue. I've been struggling with whether or not I should be doing this myself or not. I find that more and more of my day is spent watching my spend and trying to save a penny here and there. Your article made me take the leap and hire a firm to do SEO for me and now my time is spent on more important things like monitoring profit margin and inventory. Thanks for that kick in the butt!

—James M., Boise, ID

Thanks James, it's always great to hear that an article of ours led to a "kick in the butt!"

Is it true that all websites should be designed for a 640 x 480 screen? And what about page load, should we be basing load times on a 56k modem speed?

—Carolyn K., Holland, MI

640 x 480 used to be the preferred size for sites when those big old clunky cathode ray tube monitors were sitting in front of us and video cards couldn't support higher screen resolutions. Today, sites are typically designed for an 800 x 600 resolution and load time should be based on a standard DSL or cable modem connection. Load time should never be more than 3 to 6 seconds per page on even the slowest of connections.

Good comments and questions!

Let us hear from you! Write to: scotts@ebizinsider.com **eBiz**

Holiday Year-End Review



If you're reeling from this year's holiday season and want to hibernate, bring your laptop! This is a perfect time for a holiday review. While it's good to see how well you did compared to previous years, it is also good to see how your online competitors have done. No two businesses are identical, but this may help give you a baseline for comparison and improvement.

E-commerce is still exploding. Forrester Research expected online holiday retail sales to increase 21% in 2007. How did you do? No time like the present to review the past! Many lessons from the holiday season can be carried through the year.

Your year-end review should include:

- 1) Website Analytics
- 2) Promotional Activity
- 3) Marketing Performance
- 4) Inventory Management
- 5) Customer Service

Website Analytics

If you created special holiday gift sections or categories; how did they perform? Rather than examining the number of people who visited those sections, instead see if the holiday promotions increased conversions. Study the data to see if people shopped via search, regular categories or the gift sections.

Many analytic programs give you this type of insight with the click of the mouse, but if you don't have those stats readily available then compare the number of visitors to that page with the sales of the products in that area. Make a note of any changes that might boost traffic and awareness to those areas.

Promotional Activity

Promotions are more important than ever during the holiday season. Review which promotions drove the most traffic to your website and which promotions led to the most sales. Ask basic questions. What worked, what didn't and why? Which promotions generated the best conversions? Best sales?

If you see a promotion that generated traffic but few conversions, you may need to tweak your landing page, the spot where you send your customers. If a holiday promotion worked, see if it has success during the rest of the year. Tweak and refine your promotions to boost sales.

Marketing Performance

Review your holiday marketing efforts. You might have the right message, but did you get it in front of the right people? How well did your banner perform? How about your pay-per-click marketing? Did you see any improvement during the holiday season?

Analyze the traffic and see which types of marketing provided the highest conversions. Then, focus your marketing budget on the winners.

Inventory Management

All the data analysis in the world won't help if you're out of stock. If you had problems filling specific orders because your inventory ran out the door too quickly, fix the problem. Review past holidays sales and plan on increasing inventory levels by September. Monitor new items or items that you feel will be big sellers during the holiday season and adjust stock accordingly.

Do you have extra inventory on hand that didn't move as quickly as you hoped? Get rid of it! Now is a perfect time for a website promotion or e-mail blast. Get rid of any excess inventory now and fill your shelves with products that will move.

Customer Service

Service is vital during the holidays. You may have been able to get away with e-mail correspondence the rest of the year, not during the holidays. Your customers want attention! Toll-free numbers are worth their

weight in gold for confused customers. Providing live chat services allows you to answer questions immediately, without requiring someone to pick up a phone. Review the complaints you logged this year and see where you can improve. While you're at it, remember to improve your strengths too.

There is no excuse for letting your customer service voice mail fill up. If you found yourself overwhelmed this year with calls, e-mails and chats, consider adding part-time help during the peak season or talk to an outside call center.

Looking Ahead

After completing your holiday review, take the next step and create a roadmap for the coming year. Note important deadlines and dates so you don't find yourself making changes at the last minute, or worse, the same mistakes as this past year. Make the effort now so that you can reap the rewards tomorrow (and beyond). **eBiz**



By Kurt Illian
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botw.org

BOTW Web Directory Listing

Benefits of a Best of the Web listing:

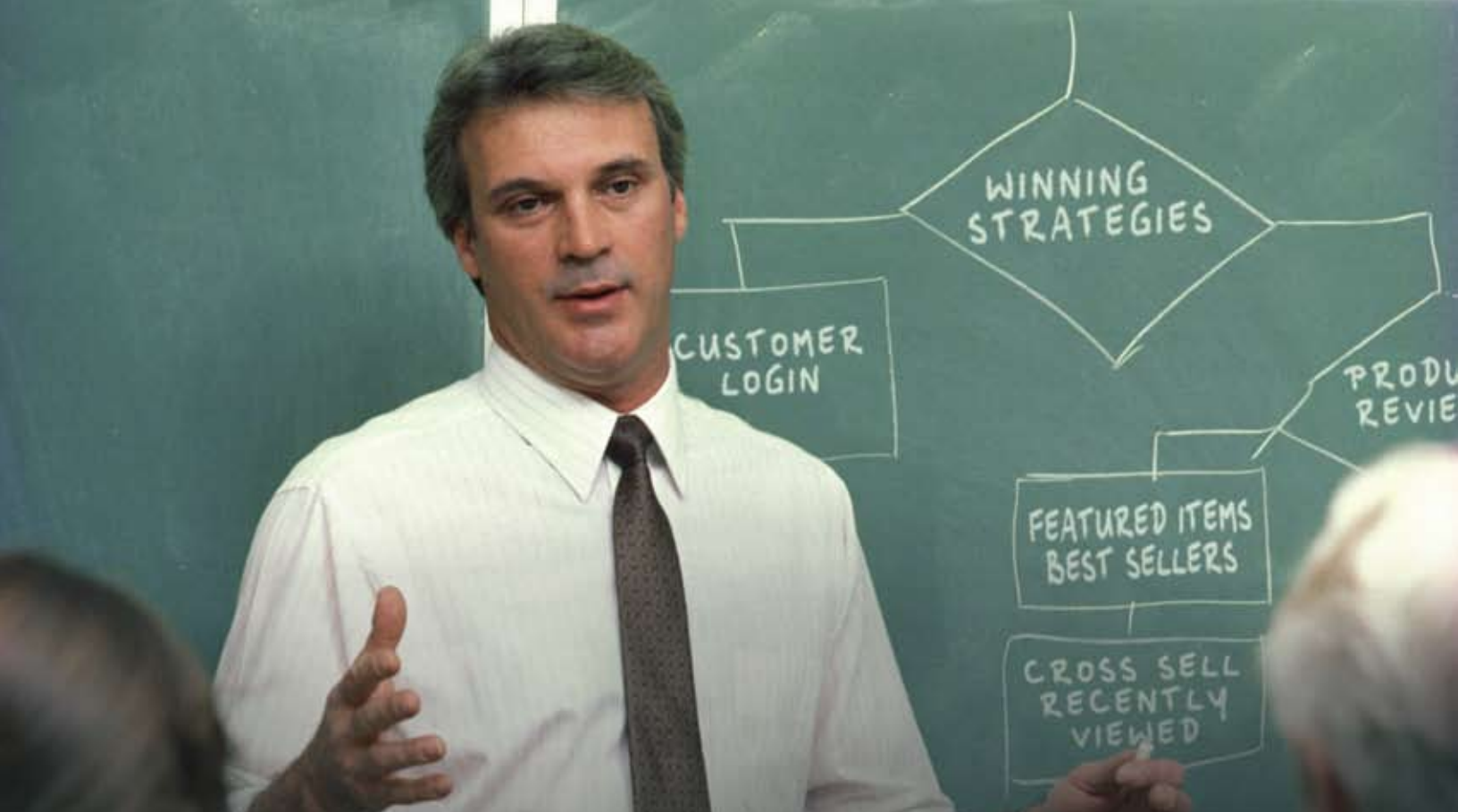
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Add Your Site



Winning Strategies to Keep your Shoppers coming back

We all know the challenge of driving traffic to your website and trying to convert the sale. There are endless features available for your e-commerce website, but which ones will have the most effect on your shoppers? Following are some features that every e-commerce site should have available to their customers.

Claim Your Shoppers

Customer Login is commonplace among e-commerce sites. Your customers can create unique accounts, save their information for later use, see past orders placed and even set reminders to purchase items for gifts. A personalized site is easier to use and will keep your store the “go to” site. In addition to giving your shoppers this great functionality, as a merchant you can add additional marketing elements to the registration process and gather valuable

material for e-mail marketing campaigns. When customers create accounts, they can request e-mail about certain products of interest. Merchants can then target certain markets when doing marketing for sales.

Make it Easy

While many shoppers may know what product they want, they still often do some research before actually buying. While your site may be better, many shoppers will purchase from the place with the most info. Adding a Product (User) Reviews section to your product detail pages will allow your visitors to read and write reviews for your products, keeping the potential shopper in the buying cycle. Merchants can also use the Product Reviews functionality to perform post-sale marketing by sending an e-mail to the shopper inviting them to express

their own comments about the item in exchange for a coupon code or other special promotion.

Many shoppers like research but many more really don't want to think about it. By offering the right products for that particular client base you can help them make their decisions.

Make it Obvious

By offering featured and/or best-selling items on your home page, your visitors see what's hot and what's not with your particular offerings. Display these options right on the home page so shoppers can click onto an item and start the buying cycle. Making items rotate and appear differently on each page load will also help your site appear constantly updated.

Cross Sell

Cross Sell items can help turn a 1 item sale into a multiple item sale. This works best on item pages and on the shopping cart page of the checkout process. Recommending accessories at a discount price at the time of purchase will entice your shoppers to buy more.

Help Them Navigate

If shoppers are navigating around your site, consider adding Recently Viewed Items. By implementing this feature on your category and item pages, shoppers will be able to see the last few items they reviewed and click directly into those items. Consider category page shopping tools such as a comparison feature where shoppers can see key product information side by side for many items and purchase directly from that page. This can reduce the number of page views as well as increase your conversions by making it much easier for a shopper to make an educated decision.

Don't forget about the search aspect of your e-commerce site. Marketing Sherpa studies have shown that 48% of visitors search for an item in the search box when they first enter a site. A good internal search function that allows your shoppers to refine their searches based on price and relevance will make it easy for them to find the items they want and then make the purchase.

Summing Up

To know what features will best help your site, listen to your customers' suggestions. Also, study your analytic data to see where you are driving the most traffic as well as getting the highest bounce rate. Use every feature you can to make your site work better and give your customers what they need. If it helps, add it. Remember, the easier the shopping process, the happier the shopper. And we all like happy shoppers...! **eBiz**



By John Tomkoski
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Maximize your online sales this year with Snap Shop!



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Unused Gift Cards & Gift Certificates

Tracking, Reporting, and Staying Legal

Fresh off the holiday season, you probably sold and received gift cards. Last year consumers spent \$73 billion on gift cards. Approximately 5-10% of the cards sold are never redeemed. Did you know there are some states with laws that require you to report unused cards and certificates? This raises some questions gift card sellers should be addressing:

1. How do I track gift cards?

- Each card/certificate should have a unique identifying number.
- Each card/certificate sold should have a start date or in using a "credit card" certificate, should have a written start date.
- Each card/certificate should have an expiration date or the words "or as required by law".
- If selling different cards/certificates for different promotions, be sure to have a code to identify the card sold for each promotion.
- Track the certificates that are actually redeemed.
- Keep a list of outstanding gift certificates.
- If possible, get the customer name and address purchasing the gift card. Consumers may be reluctant to part with that information, but it is very helpful when the gift card goes unredeemed.

2. How do I stay legal and report unused gift cards?

With the increased number of gift certificates sold over the past several years, state governments are taking notice. Many have established "escheat laws" as it pertains to abandoned property including gift certificates.

In the simplest terms, "escheat" refers to the process through which property that is, or is deemed to be, unclaimed or abandoned becomes property of the

state after a certain period of time. All states have escheat laws that, while being similar, are all somewhat different. Each state defines how long property must be unclaimed before it is considered abandoned. Most states have a three to five year period before the gift certificate is considered abandoned. The chart below shows some examples of how the laws differ by state, according to the "National Conference of State Legislatures" website.

With each state looking to increase revenues without increasing taxes, some states have established "Unclaimed Property" reporting where depending on the state, corporations and businesses now are required to file "Unclaimed Property" returns and submit payments for the unclaimed property, which includes unused gift certificates. Most states require that gift certificates carrying a partial amount must also be turned over to the state. Reporting is done on an annual basis. The penalty for violating the gift certificate law can result in severe penalties, including fines, multiple damages, and attorney fees.

Should you request more information, you can visit the National Conference of State Legislatures at www.ncsl.org. Here you can access each state's statutes regarding abandoned gift certificates. Learn the laws that apply to coupons where you do business now, that way you will be able to avoid any unwelcome surprises later. **eBiz**



By Patty Sleboda
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The chart below shows some examples of how the laws differ by state, according to the "National Conference of State Legislatures" website.

State:	Escheat Provision:
California	Gift certificates purchased after 1997 are not subject to escheat. The escheat law does apply to any gift certificate that has an expiration date and that is given in exchange for money or any other thing of value.
Connecticut	Gift Certificates do not escheat to the state.
Pennsylvania	The consideration paid for a gift certificate or gift card which has remained unredeemed for two years or more after its redemption period has expired and for five years or more from the date of issuance if not, redemption is specified.
Utah	A gift certificate greater than \$25 that remains unredeemed for more than five years after issuance is considered abandoned. The amount considered abandoned is the price paid for the certificate itself.
West Virginia	Gift certificate, three years after the thirty-first day of December of the year in which the certificate is sold, but if redeemable in merchandise only, the amount abandoned is deemed to be 60 percent of the certificate's face value.



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Derek Kleinow - TigerGPS.com

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Managing Virtual Employees

In today's wired world, it's easier than ever to employ quality people from across the miles. More and more telecommute as it becomes less and less necessary to actually work out of the main office. This is also true for many e-commerce companies.

A key advantage of a virtual workforce is that it can save on obvious capital expenses such as office space. Even employees who live locally show an increase in productivity as they can benefit from less commuting and fewer gas pains.

The key, of course, is control. How do you hire and maintain remote employees? How does a business owner effectively manage and motivate telecommuters? How do you get them to perform to your standards?

Finding the Right Person for the Job

There are two types of telecommuting employees. One group is hired right off the bat as remote workers. The second group is when in-house employees begin to work from home instead. In the latter case, managers already have personal knowledge of the employee's work ethic, skills, productivity and personality. When

hiring somebody new for a telecommuting position, there are challenges. It takes a very self-motivated, undistracted and focused person to be able to work from home. In addition to finding the right person, the right tools and technology also need to be in place in the virtual office. You will find more ideas below.



Communication is the key issue when dealing with virtual employees. No matter how many miles you are from your staff, technology has given us tools to keep the lines of communication open.

Staying Connected: Communication Tools & Tips for Remote Workers

Communication is the key issue when dealing with virtual employees. You can't just pop into someone's cubicle to check on them nor chat with them at the water cooler. However, no matter how many miles you are from your staff, technology has given us tools to keep the lines of communication open. These tools actually keep in-house employees linked too—we all know someone who IMs or e-mails someone sitting two desks down!

- **Instant Messenger**

If you have the whole staff on IM, users at all locations will be able to see who is online and available. If a virtual employee has a customer on the line and needs a question answered, they can get an instant answer—without having to put an employee on hold to dial up someone else, or run down the hall to ask! Links and files can also be sent via this medium.

- **E-mail**

An e-mail program is a no-brainer in the modern office, but it can be an even more important tool for those working from home. For instance, if a virtual employee is attending a meeting via teleconference or Web conference and needs the hand-outs,

they can be sent via e-mail. If paper memos are passed out at the main office, e-mail them to the virtual staff. This keeps communication levels high among all employees. E-mail programs like Outlook can sync with PDAs and Blackberries, too. Faxes can even be accepted by e-mail.

- **Shared Calendars**

Microsoft Outlook allows for shared calendars, as do various CRM software programs like Salesforce. Managers should have access to virtual employees' work calendars, which could also include time allotted for personal things such as doctor and dentist appointments. This way, employers can always stay on top of employees' whereabouts.

- **Teleconferencing & Web Conferencing**

These tools allow remote staff to be included in office meetings, or allow remote staffers to meet one-on-one

for training purposes, performance reviews and even disciplinary meetings. Teleconferencing is less expensive; web conferencing is more visual. A teleconference may be more suitable for short meetings to discuss goals, plans and the like, while a web conference (ex: NetMeeting) can be used for training, presentations and brainstorming sessions where visual ideas may be shared. If virtual employees are in other time zones, these conferences can also be recorded for later listening/viewing.

- **Online Meeting & Shared Desktop Programs**

Similar to above, but workers can share a desktop, which is great for training purposes and IT issues. This also can help streamline the creative process between employees who are working from different locations.

- **Wiki Technology**

Wikis are internal documents that store information and necessary files and documents, which employees can easily access at any time. New policies, procedures, protocols, etc. can be updated here more quickly than printing out new employee handbooks or addenda. Wikis can also include a company directory, product/service information, client lists and more. Employees can find things on their own without asking for help. According to the Gartner Group, by 2009 half of all corporations will have adopted the Wiki concept.

Tips for Running a Seamless Operation

There are many web-based project management software programs and applications available to bring employees together. There are also wonderful phone systems available for this very purpose. Customers can dial in on one main number, and through the menu can be transferred to employees located anywhere. This conveys the impression that the entire operation is under one roof.

Managing Virtual Employees continued on page 12

Tips for Managing the Virtual Employee

In-house workers usually have set schedules. Many at-home workers feel that as long as they get the job done and produce results, they can work when they want to work. This may appease some managers, but others may want to be sure

- Communicate using the previously mentioned tools—very often.
- Provide training and support, as if they were in-house employees.

Motivating Employees You Don't Regularly See Face-to-Face

Even though working remotely is a choice,



Even though working remotely is a choice, virtual employees can often feel isolated or not part of the team. Invite them to company outings and parties, they can and should be part of annual events.

they are getting a full 40-hour workweek, just like an in-house employee. Here are some tips to manage the remote worker:

- Set clear expectations at the beginning of their schedule--do you want an employee to work 9-5, or go at his/her own pace?
- Utilize online time clocks like the one at PunchedIn.com (even for salaried employees).
- Utilize IM- have employees logged on and update status when on a break, lunch, appointment, etc.
- Perform Quality Assurance- depending on the nature of your business. For example, if your virtual employee spends time on the phone in sales or customer service you can utilize call-monitoring technology.
- Site visits- consider visits to his or her home office every so often.

virtual employees can often feel isolated or not part of the team. Here are some tips to keep virtual employees motivated:

- Invite them to company outings and parties. They might not make happy hour with the gang on Fridays, but they can and should be part of annual events like a summer family picnic, client appreciation night or a holiday party.
- Include virtual employees in meetings regarding successes via a conference call. For instance, if sales have soared through the roof and you are having an on-the-fly meeting to congratulate your staff, dial in the virtual staffers.
- Complimenting in-house employees is easy because you see them in the office. Be sure to send kudos via phone, e-mail or IM to remote workers, too.
- Include virtual employees in all in-office incentive programs.

- If vendors or clients drop off freebies, promo items or samples for the office, be sure to periodically send them out and surprise your remote workers. Everyone loves free stuff!

If the right technology is lined up and the proper management is in place, a single virtual employee or entire remote workforce can contribute to your e-commerce success. Keep these tips in mind as you expand your business, and you will have happy, productive employees-- no matter where their office might be. **eBiz**



By Donna Talarico
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Hiring Tips

- Check references. Contact at least two personal and two professional.
- Check traits. Look for team players, great communicators, self-starters.
- Get it in writing. Virtual employees must sign a vendor agreement. Be sure it is clear that your company owns all the work produced and that the virtual employees agree not to solicit your clients.
- Establish rules. Develop virtual office guidelines & policies and expectations for communication, work hours etc. Make sure virtual employees sign off on them.

Handling/Managing

- Communication
- Video/teleconferencing
- Utilize Web-based project management systems
- Clarification of responsibilities, expectations and deadlines. **eBiz**



By Ed Stanchak
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The Hidden Costs of Credit Card Processing...

If you're an e-commerce merchant, a credit card processor—usually but not always a bank—is handling your credit card business. There is also a gateway acting as an information conduit to your processor. It is critical for modern businesses to work with credit card processors and the gateways which transmit our transactions back and forth at hyper-speed. But remember, banks are businesses too. So are gateways. That means they're in competition with other companies offering similar services. Use that basic business tenet to your advantage and the savings you negotiate around your credit card fees can add up to real money over time.

Let's Make a Deal

If you're just starting out, don't simply take the first offer you get. Shop around. If you're in business and you want to stay with your current processor, fine. But get a competitive bid from another company and see if your people can match it. Prepare to be pleasantly surprised!

Know the Territory

Learn the kinds of margins your bank has to manage. Find out what the "Interchange Fees" are. Interchange is the "cost" structure in which all fees are based. Interchange fees are rates charged by Visa and Mastercard; and they are published for you to see. By comparing what your bank charges you to the published fees, a merchant can see how much money the processor is making on your account. This gives you more room to negotiate. Unfortunately, the processor makes substantially less money than the actual card "issuing" banks, but that doesn't mean that there isn't room for you to save money. Keep in mind that the Interchange rates set by Visa and Mastercard are non-negotiable, only the "markup" between the published rates and what you are actually charged are.

Examine Your Fees

Remember, these are banks, so think "free checking." There are many areas where the seemingly monolithic lender can be flexible if you know where to look.

Statement fees and supplies charges—avoid them when possible. These fees are virtually pure profit for the credit card processor. Supplies charges include things like signage, door stickers, register tapes and the like. And you need them, why? Unless you have a bricks-and-mortar store, they don't even apply for e-business. Get them waived. The statement fee is what the bank charges you—for sending you your own bill! Sadly, it does cost them something, but pay attention! It usually costs vastly less than the fee they want to charge you.

Setup fees—Fight them. If the bank wants your business badly enough they'll waive them.

Early cancellation fees—these generally exist in the processing bank's contract. Fight to get these waived.

Chargeback fees—These are very negotiable. A chargeback is when a consumer says they didn't authorize the charge to their card. The chargeback fee is the administrative "cost" for the investigation and research that the processing bank must do. Negotiate this fee. Standard chargeback fees are around \$35 per incident, but you can negotiate a much better rate.

Per-transaction fees—Any little bit helps. This is the fee on each sale you ring through to your processor. Study the interchange rates. Any reduction here is multiplied times your number of sales. Any increment can be a genuine savings.

The Payment Gateway

A payment gateway is the software application for e-commerce merchants and mail order/telephone merchants that authorizes and settles the payment transaction data. In traditional retail, it is the network that transmits and encrypts the data between the merchant and the processing banks. Yahoo! provides this service as part of its e-commerce package at no extra charge. Many other platforms do not include this and so again, you have an opportunity for real savings

if you negotiate. Most gateways have transaction costs involved. Negotiate these rates, or use a system like "Yahoo! Small Business Merchant Solutions" where the gateway is included at no extra charge.

Summing Up

The bad news is that the processor is only an intermediary and, unlike most banks, work at a very small profit margin. Still, any cut in your fees, especially something high-volume like a per-transaction fee, can mean a real savings over thousands of transactions. The key to remember is, you have leverage because they have competition. Watch the numbers and shop around.

For further information:

"http://usa.visa.com/merchants/operations/interchange_rates.html"
"http://usa.visa.com/merchants/operations/interchange_rates.html"
http://usa.visa.com/merchants/operations/interchange_rates.html

"http://www.mastercard.com/us/wce/PDF/14992_MasterCard_Interchange_Rates_and_Criteria_-_October_2006.pdf"
"http://www.mastercard.com/us/wce/PDF/14992_MasterCard_Interchange_Rates_and_Criteria_-_October_2006.pdf"
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eBiz



By Joe Palko

joep@ebizinsider.com

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So your online store is finally paying off. You have a well-designed site, you're fully optimized for organic listings and your paid search program is providing healthy returns. How do you prevent stagnation? Or, perhaps your business is starting to take off but you don't have the time or resources for traditional marketing. Where do you turn for growth? Examine Social Media Marketing. Some call it a trend, others call it evolution of the Internet, but either way Social Media is the new home of the masses.

Wikipedia defines social media as

“the democratization of information, transforming people from content readers into content publishers. It is the shift from a broadcast mechanism to a many-to-many model, rooted in conversations between authors, people, and peers.” Hmm?

Traditional marketing was rooted firmly around broadcast. You had a product and you broadcast it to potential customers as much as possible through mailings, radio ads, television ads, billboards etc. Even pay-per-click ads for search engines simply broadcast to the widest “specific” audience possible.

Social Media Marketing lets you communicate your message and by allowing your customers to interact with this message, mash it up and re-invent it, all while generating instantaneous feedback.

One main Social Media arena that facilitates this flow is Social Utilities, with sites like Facebook, Myspace, Nexopia, etc. They're networks of people connected together by common interests, geographical locations, schools, or places of employment. The cleanest and fastest growing social utility is

Facebook. Recent numbers show Facebook growing at over 3% a week with 3 million users age 25-34 and over 380,000 ages 35-44. With 47,000 college, high school, employee and regional networks, the chances of finding your target niche is high.

Moving In

A Facebook profile can house your company's unique content, whether it's a video of your latest product, a blog describing a positive user experience, picture albums of a new design, or a podcast explaining its benefits. Your e-commerce store houses your products and Facebook is the PR van that hits the road to connect you directly with potential customers.

Participate & Connect

Millions of people are connected to Facebook through shared interests, videos, pictures, messages, blog posts and stories. Sellers of skis can search millions of Facebook users for skiers. By sending out a custom message inviting them to be "friends" with your company you open your doors to your customers.

The key is to offer a product or social object compelling enough for customers to share with friends and increase your potential for viral marketing.

Create a Group

"Groups" are based around interests and can update the members about certain news, activities, events or causes that interest your niche. Toy companies can create Facebook groups to promote awareness of toys from China. They could push for safety legislation, or be an information hub with the latest list of recalled products. This builds trust in the community and can result in more traffic to your website. If your message matches the pulse of your customers, they'll help you spread it. You can also make announcements, post updates and announce sales.

Build an Application

By far the most powerful aspect of Facebook is its open source nature.

Facebook gives freedom to outside developers to create custom applications. The cost of Facebook's code to develop this is---zilch! With a little technical know-how you can create a custom application that will capitalize on the viral components of the social utility, spreading your company's story and products throughout the community.

A prime example is the Washington Post's Compass application. It sits on a user's profile page and can be clicked and added by friends. With this application you take a simple survey and a compass is put on your home page showing how liberal or


conservative you are. This is a simple concept, but when shared among friends becomes a powerful branding tool for the Washington Post.

Facebook is completely free. Free to store pictures, free to post fresh content, free to create groups, free to network with customers, and free to communicate with your niches. Now that you're familiar with Social Media what do you have to lose?

eBiz



By Jeff Petrosillo
jeffp@ebizinsider.com



**Organic Search • Pay Per Click • Media Buying
Affiliate Marketing • E-Mail Marketing**

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A major challenge of e-commerce is helping your customers communicate what they want while being largely limited to using the written word. They usually don't have verbal exchange with your sales person nor do they get to use their hands to describe what they want to buy. To compound the problem for online shoppers, there is spelling. What if it's not perfect? Ironically, when you are in

In addition, many people learn about products through word-of-mouth or radio advertising. In those cases, because consumers might not see the product spelled correctly at first, they may mishear or misunderstand the name of the product. This occurs frequently with brand names, so if you have such a product, consider adding an array of keyword misspelling variations accordingly.

with and without common symbols such as dashes or apostrophes:

clearance baby's blankets and clearance baby's blankets

General keywords tend to have high costs and low conversion rates; however some general keywords may be very relevant to your business. Control the cost-per-acquisition (CPA) by including a mix of general keywords (which convert at higher CPA's), coupled with terms derived from misspellings and other variations (which convert at lower CPA's). You can reduce your overall CPA for the entire category and get more efficient use of your budget.



Misspelled Keywords

= Captured Sales

school, misspellings may cost you some points, but in the pay-per-click (PPC) world, if you *don't* include misspellings in your advertising plan, it may cost you *money!*

When building PPC campaigns, you must keep the user in mind. Think of keyword variations that a customer is likely to use when entering a term into search. The better you can read their habits, the more you will profit!

Sometimes users misspell keywords because they do not know the correct spelling. Others misspell because they are typing too quickly and make typographical errors. Some users search by using the singular form of the term; others search by using the plural form. In cases where a brand or term includes an apostrophe or dash, some customers search with the punctuation, others leave it off.

Let's examine a few examples by using the term "clearance baby blanket":

Misspellings:

A common misspelling of the word *clearance* is: *cleareance*.

As a result, you may want to consider including the following keyword in your account:

cleareance baby blanket.

Typos:

Many people will mis-key the word blanket as: *blaket*

So, it makes sense to include the following keyword in your account: *clearance baby blaket*

Variations:

Some users search with informal nicknames for products. In this case, we'll consider a variation of the word blanket: *blankie*

This would give us a new keyword: *clearance baby blankie*

This is an important area where you can use your imagination to your advantage. You know your products and their "pet" names. Make sure you cover the variations.

Plurals:

Consumers are not always consistent when searching singular vs. plural forms of keywords. For example, in addition to the term *clearance baby blanket*, include some plural versions: *clearance baby blankets* and *clearance babies blankets*.

Symbols:

If we further explore the opportunities, we can find additional keyword variations

Win with Logic, Imagination and Technology

So, how do you manage and target the endless number of variations when the rule is that there are no rules? Stay focused. Use logic, common sense, and a little bit of creativity. Most important, use keyword research tools! Google, Yahoo! and MSN all offer free keyword suggestion tools for account owners. Numerous companies offer keyword research software for a fee. Investigate the options and decide, but take advantage of the advances available. Always keep in mind that you want to include keywords with search volume; otherwise, you could be wasting valuable time.

Remember the keys to making the grade and capturing sales:

- Misspellings
- Plurals
- Typos
- Symbols
- Variations

Some search engines and keyword match types will account for certain misspellings and variations, but why take the chance? Be sure your campaigns include common keyword alternatives [in addition to the correctly spelled terms] so you can capitalize on opportunities that your competitors are missing!

Best of luck in your PPC endeavors—oops! I mean...*endeavors!* **eBiz**



By Robyn Craig
robync@ebizinsider.com

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100 million accounts,
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Is Your Company a Great Place to Work?

Many businesses have perks or programs that can make the work day fun, but is your company *really* a great place to work?

I took along 20 of the Solid Cactus staff recently as we attended the “Best Places to Work in Pennsylvania” awards ceremony in Hershey, PA. Solid Cactus was named the 11th “Best Place to Work in PA.” That’s #11 out of 221,000 businesses in the commonwealth. It’s also the second year in a row we’ve taken home this prestigious award. Last year we were #21. So we’re only getting better.

Many states offer programs to recognize outstanding businesses. Being named one of the “Best” is a two-part process. 75% of the decision comes from anonymous employee responses and 25% is employer response. The award is modeled after Fortune’s “100 Best Places to Work” and is organized by the Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry, the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, Team Pennsylvania Foundation and the Best Companies Group.

Being selected as one of the “Best Places to Work” is an enviable honor. During the annual dinner companies related their efforts to make the list. They included: reduced or no-cost health care, family leave benefits, company paid lunches, open-door policies and other inducements.

Our Approach

We offer employees free continental breakfast daily, free soda, juice, coffee and snacks all day, weekly departmental lunches off-site with senior management, weekly “lunch and learn” sessions complete with pizza, flexible scheduling, paid vacation, sick and personal time, 401k with a company match, health, dental and vision insurance with a partial co-pay, use of company shuttle buses for airport runs or company outings...the list is endless!

Solid Cactus is moving our headquarters and taking over an entire elementary school. We’ll have locker rooms, fitness center, a full size gym with a basketball court and my personal favorite—a full-service café serving breakfast and lunch.

You don’t have to go broke trying to make the workday more productive or fun. Start simply!

Try lunch a couple of times a month. Better communication between management and employees and a more relaxed time-off policy is a great place to start. Note the words “communication between management and employees.” This is critical. I hear too many stories of how workers have no understanding of what is happening “upstairs.” Employees should have a clear understanding of management’s goals, objectives and visions for the future.

What do Employees Expect?

Employees expect the tools to do their job to be ready, waiting and functioning properly. If equipment needs to be replaced, replace it. Making employees work with broken or malfunctioning equipment leads to an unhappy, unproductive workplace.

Employees expect to be treated fairly. Have a well-written employee manual and make sure that whenever disciplinary action is needed the procedures are followed uniformly across the board.

Employees expect to be included. Have weekly or monthly team meetings to update the gang on what’s going on in the company, how their department is doing and what’s coming up in the future.

Employees expect to be appreciated for their work. We all like a pat on the back, don’t we? Recognize outstanding work with an award, a token of appreciation, free lunch or some other fun thing. Employee recognition in front of their peers is very important and motivates others to strive for similar honors.

Employees expect to have a life outside of work. Establish a scheduling policy which offers flex time off when employees are needed to work a little overtime. Don’t be a stickler when granting requests for days off. Your people are the lifeblood of your organization—treat them accordingly!

Employees expect to be heard. I’ve gotten more good ideas from our Solid Cactus staff than all the seminars I’ve ever attended. Listening makes your people happy and makes you—MONEY. So listen already!

Ready, Set, Go!

Make your company a “Best Place to Work.” Sit down with your employees and solicit their feedback. Ask them what can make the workday better. You will find that a little can go a long way.

In the end, happy employees make for happy customers and happy customers make business—better! **eBiz**



By Scott Sanfilippo
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My Site is Down— Now What?

As we all know, websites sometimes can go down from circumstances beyond your control. It's important to be prepared for when this happens so you can navigate the bumpy times with as little impact as possible to your business. There will be occasional problems with your site. What follows are some ideas for handling a site shutdown or slowdown. We'll review steps you can take to protect yourself before a site crash and what to do when the unthinkable becomes real.

If Your Site Appears to be Down

1. Check your website provider's system status page or call them directly to see if it's a known issue.
2. Call other operators. Ask friends to check from alternate locations to see if they're experiencing the outage. Sometimes local Internet carriers have routing problems; it might not be the store.
3. Report it. If the site is down and not listed on the updates page, contact a support representative to report the outage.

If Your Site Goes Down

Follow a plan to save as much business as possible. You must let customers know that you know you're having a problem and you need somewhere to send them to protect your business.

Option 1: The Easy Way

Before it happens: Make a landing page informing customers that your site is

experiencing issues and give them a phone number where they can place orders. Keep this on an externally hosted account separate from your main store and keep the page hidden until you're ready to use it.

When it happens: If your site goes down and you think it will be down for more than a few minutes, quickly switch your DNS settings to point to the landing page you created. This will inform customers and allow you to save some of the orders.

Option 2: The Hard, Better Way

Before it happens: Create another store on another platform with another web host. Keep your second site updated at least once per month so it is as close to a mirror as possible. Make sure to password protect the site, so it doesn't get "spidered" and picked up as duplicate content.

When it happens: If your site goes down and you think it will be down for more than a few minutes, quickly switch your DNS settings to point to your secondary store.

Shopping Cart Issues:

Approach with preparation and prevention.

Before it happens: Create a banner mentioning that your shopping cart is having problems and encourage customers to call in their orders. Also create a variable that allows you to display emergency text on all of your item pages. Get help from a programmer unless you are comfortable with store programming.

When it happens: Activate the banner, update the emergency text and put a message on your shopping cart. Publish your site and checkout settings so your customers can see the message and you can save the orders.

It's important that you have a plan in place in case your site goes down, whatever it may be. While the above are strictly worst case scenarios, if your volume is high enough, it's better to be safe than sorry!

eBiz



By Justin Rattigan
justinr@ebizinsider.com

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"Our November sales alone paid for the entire cost of our site redesign. What at first looked like an expense turned out to be a great investment."

—Jason George, PashminaGalleria.com



If you're looking for a fancy wrap, stole, scarf or shawl, sooner or later you'll hear the word Pashmina. The Pashmina is a goat from the mountains of Nepal which produces fine wonderful threads. They're soft, luxurious and the folks at pashminagalleria.com travel all the way to the Himalayas to buy their products.

The company was started by Cynthia Meer as a traditional bricks-and-mortar operation in 2001, but very soon she and her family realized their niche products were better suited for the internet. In 2004 pashminagalleria.com was born on what Jason George describes as a shoe-string budget. "It was a very simple site," said George. "It was just a list of products with a few tiny photos that took forever to load. It's hard to remember that back then, most people were still on dial-up. 2004 seems like a long time ago."

The first site was replaced by a second after eight months and in 2006 they switched to the Yahoo! format. "It was more sophisticated," said George. "More than anything it gave us great credibility to be a Yahoo! store. We realized, if people

A Goat from the Mountains of Nepal Produces Fine Wonderful Threads for Pashmina Galleria

will order from this, imagine what we could do on a fully-functional e-commerce site!"

The Big Step

Earlier this year, pashminagalleria.com went with a custom redesign of their Yahoo! store. Among the new changes were a customized header, a custom home page, Checkout Manager design and, most recently Image Click to Enlarge.

"The header looks more professional," said George. "Our logo is still simple, but they tweaked it and also played with the color scheme. These things count. We're selling semi-luxury items and the gradation of colors helps consumer confidence. Also, the redesign carries our colors right through the site. We believe the net result is increased credibility."

Pashminagalleria.com brought its strengths up to the home page and showcased them. They prominently featured their free shipping (with a \$50 order) to alert customers. They had photos of Pashmina products at the bottom of the home page. Also, in the copy on the home page is the bold reminder that Pashmina products "make great gifts." Jason George liked the touches. "The gift comment puts the thought in people's minds that maybe a friend would like something wonderful too," he said. "We also highlighted 'e-commerce by Yahoo!'. It gives confidence to our customers."

One of their wisest decisions, George said, was their new Checkout Manager design. The changes showed up immediately at the bottom line. "The new design carries our branding right through checkout," he said. "Customers don't see a difference

and don't feel as if somehow they're leaving the site. Our shopping cart abandonment rate immediately dropped by half. Those are huge numbers!"

The Results

In the first month after the redesign, revenues were up 50% and shopping cart abandonment was halved. "I believe that's a direct correlation to the Checkout Manager redesign," said George. "Our sales have increased by \$22 per order. That's a 30% jump for us and I think the copy on the home page played a role." Sales for this December are more than double what they were a year ago and will top out at 106% of the 2006 total.

Going Forward

Pashminagalleria.com added Image Click to Enlarge and believes it will have a big impact going forward. Customers will be able to view the products from several angles and see close-up views of the threads. It should also help answer many questions which previously might have required e-mail and phone calls. "Ultimately, this will help our productivity," said George.

Pashminagalleria.com also plans to add a cross-selling feature and product reviews during the coming year. "The Internet can bring your products to your customers if you're willing to be innovative," said Jason George. "I just wish we'd made some of these changes a year ago!" **eBiz**



By Kevin Lynn

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Tech Corner: The Virtual Office



Whether you sell jewelry, pet supplies, video games, or sexy lingerie – all e-commerce professionals strive for efficiency. By creating a virtual office, you can streamline your operations, and often create new possibilities for your company. This month we'll look at ways you can use technology to create your virtual office.

Voice Communications

We've all seen the advertisements for Vonage – for \$25-\$50 a month you can get yourself a phone line or two that use your Internet connection to get a dialtone. Keep in mind that you'll need 128k of upload AND download speed for VoIP to work properly, and that using an Internet phone will reduce the bandwidth available to other computers on your network. Do your homework on choosing a provider that offers Quality of Service (QoS) controls.

Look at SoftPhones – special software that allows you to turn your computer into a telephone with the addition of a microphone and speakers. Popular applications such as Yahoo! Messenger, Skype.com and other providers allow for free VoIP communications, as long as all parties are using the same service.

Certainly one of the most attractive and compelling qualities about Voice over IP is the fact that you take your phone number anywhere you have an Internet connection. If you travel, you can literally take your number with you everywhere. Perhaps even better, you can also have staff members all over the country using your same telephone exchange – with the ability to transfer calls as if they were in the next room. This pays the dividend of giving your business a central and ultimately more professional “feel” to customers.

Faxing

For a small business, fax machines are often expensive to maintain – they require toner, paper, a phone line and someone in one place to monitor the machine. Providers like jconnect.com provide a local phone number (or toll free) number that is dual purpose. If a voice caller dials the number, your voice-mail greeting answers. The message is delivered as a .wav or .au file to your inbox. If sending you a fax, the system detects this and delivers the fax to your inbox as .pdf. Sending a fax is simple, using a special client.

E-mail

If you're using your ISP's e-mail system (e.g. verizon.net, aol.com, comcast.net) consider using a hosted web-based system. Google Apps (www.google.com/a) and the related gmail.com are popular web-based e-mail clients. Google Mail will interface with Microsoft Outlook and Windows LiveMail easily if you use it, but it will also give you access to your e-mail from virtually any web-browser including mobile web browsers on your cell phone/PDA. Another advantage of the web-based hosting system is that you won't need to change your e-mail address if you move, outgrow your current ISP, or become dissatisfied with it.

Virtual Meetings

Do you need to meet regularly with clients out of the area, or do you have trouble matching schedules with important people? Consider meeting virtually. For \$50 a month Citrix Systems GoToMeeting.com allows you to share your computer's desktop so you can collaborate on projects. You can also use the conference calling services of FreeConference.com to get everyone on the same line. The calls are toll calls, but if you're using a VoIP or SoftPhone interface (as outlined above)

you aren't paying those tolls. Almost all VoIP/SoftPhone services have built-in 3-way calling for smaller conferences. In fairness I should admit that meetings can also happen over instant messaging – but gee–tone of voice just doesn't come across the same when typed!

You don't have to make the jump all at once. Add features as you become comfortable with them and begin to utilize them. The virtual office can save you time and money and give your potential customers the impression that you are an integrated, sophisticated, fluid business. Those qualities alone make the virtual office worth examining. **eBiz**

Resources

Voice Communications

Vonage – <http://www.vonage.com>

Skype – <http://www.skype.com>

bbtelsys – <http://bbtelsys.com>

Yahoo! Voice – <http://voice.yahoo.com>

Faxing

JConnect – <http://www.jconnect.com> (Voice & Fax)

eFax – <http://www.efax.com> (Fax Only)

E-mail

Google Mail – <http://www.gmail.com>

Google Apps – <http://www.google.com/a>

Yahoo! Mail – <http://mail.yahoo.com>

E-mail to Web – <http://www.mail2web.com>

Meetings

GoToMeeting – <http://www.gotomeeting.com>

ZohoMeeting – <http://meeting.zoho.com>

WebEx – <http://www.webex.com>

FreeConference – <http://www.freeconference.com>



By John Dawe

johnd@ebizinsider.com

Reader Survey

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1. Do you read *eBiz Insider* each month?
 Yes No

2. Do you keep past issues for future reference?
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3. Please rank topics by your interest:

	5 =Very Interested ----- 1=Not Interested				
Search Marketing	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
Customer Service	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
Warehouse & Fulfillment	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
Legal & HR	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
Operations	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
Graphic Design & Photography	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
Print & Catalogs	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
E-mail Marketing	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
Technology	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
Store & Shopping Features	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
Social Networking	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
Offline Advertising	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>

4. How would you rank the overall content of *eBiz Insider*?
 Excellent Great Good Average Poor

5. How would you rank the overall layout and design of *eBiz Insider*?
 Excellent Great Good Average Poor

6. How would you rank *eBiz Insider* as a magazine?
 Best magazine for e-commerce store owners
 Good magazine
 Average magazine
 I'll get my information about e-commerce elsewhere

7. Do you access the *eBiz Insider* website?
 Yes No

8. Was there one article that you have read in *eBiz Insider* that was most beneficial for you? Yes No – which one?

9. How often do you read the following columns/features:
 Editor's Letter Every Month Some Months Never
 Tech Corner Every Month Some Months Never
 Business Profile Every Month Some Months Never

10. Do you find these column/features interesting or helpful?

Editor's Letter Yes No

Tech Corner Yes No

Business Profile Yes No

11. If you could ask for an article on a specific subject or topic, what would it be?

12. Would you recommend *eBiz Insider* to a friend or business associate even if it had a subscription cost associated with it?
 Yes No

13. What other magazines do you read or subscribe to:

Internet Retailer

Practical E-Commerce

Multichannel Merchant

Catalog Age

Advertising Age

Other _____

14. How did you first hear of *eBiz Insider*:

It just arrived in my mailbox

A friend told me about it

Online Market World

Internet Retailer Show

Not sure

Solid Cactus

15. If you selected "Solid Cactus", how did you hear of Solid Cactus:

Fellow e-commerce store owner

Internet Search

"Designed by" link on a website

Internet Retailer

Practical E-Commerce

Yahoo! Developer Network

Other _____

16. What platform is/are your e-commerce store(s) on:

I don't have an e-commerce store

Yahoo! Store

Monster Commerce

ProStores

Amazon

Miva

Not sure

Other: _____

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