

eBiz Insider

the magazine for eCommerce professionals.

Holiday Year End Review

Blast into 2010

—By Scott Sanfilippo

- ◆ 10 Tips for Beginner Bloggers
- ◆ Keeping Customers After the Holidays: How to Turn First-Time Shoppers Into Repeat Buyers
- ◆ Navigating Your Path To SEO Success, One Link at a Time

Turn the pages of this issue into a new year for your eCommerce site, or don't. 2009 wasn't so bad, was it?

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Growing Green

By Scott Sanfilippo,
Editor in Chief, Co-founder, Solid Cactus

I recently read about Walmart's drastic effort to cut down on the 9 billion plastic bags the company uses each year. The retail giant launched a test program at many of its California stores, replacing plastic bags with reusable ones customers must purchase. While few eCommerce retailers are the size of Walmart, what we do every day to conserve and reuse contributes greatly to the overall health of our planet. Whether it's recycling paper in the office or putting recyclables out at the curb at home, every bit helps.

I've wrestled with the idea of taking eBiz Insider off the printing press and into bytes and pixels for quite a while now. Eighteen months ago, we had our first digital edition ready to go; but, instead we settled upon a bi-monthly schedule to reduce our environmental impact. With the start of the new year and some other changes planned for eBiz Insider in 2010, I felt the time was right to make the switch.

While you won't be receiving a paper copy of eBiz Insider, you will continue to receive a magazine full of timely and informative articles that focus on how to be an online success, now in an easy-to-read electronic format. Also, eBiz Insider will be supplemented by a weekly eBiz eXtra filled with a review of what our editorial team thinks were the biggest eCommerce stories of the week.

You will begin to notice the list of contributing authors start to grow. This year, we will be gradually introducing eBiz Insider to the Web.com customer base, while at the same time utilizing members of the larger Web.com team to share their knowledge of eCommerce and online marketing.

Going green is a commitment we should all make, both personally and professionally. After all, we want Mother Nature to have as long a lifespan as that fruitcake my Aunt Ethel gave me for Christmas. **eBiz**

P.S. To ensure that the magazine, as well as eBiz eXtra reaches your inbox, please take a moment to make sure that ebizinsider@solidcactus.com is not blocked by your SPAM filter. If you have friends who you feel may benefit from the information we present, have them visit us online at www.ebizinsider.com to sign up for a free subscription of their own or to view current and back issues of the magazine and to take part in our interactive forums.



Letters to the Editor...

Dear Editor: I just started to use Twitter for my business, but have found that a lot of my friends and family are on Twitter, too. Do you recommend having a personal and professional account, or is it okay to tweet about personal stuff on my store's account?

—Gabe, Boston

Hi, Gabe, I'd say there is no hard-fast rule on that. I have a personal account and I am one of several people who update the official Solid Cactus Twitter. Many of our marketing team members have a company-specific Twitter in addition to their own. Many times, as a business owner, your personality is synonymous with your brand, so there will likely be crossover, even if you do maintain two accounts. If the nature of your business is pretty professional, you may want to keep a separate account for yourself so you can be candid and more personal. However, social media is so transparent, it almost doesn't matter. People seem to like that personal touch and that mix of some professional, some personal. If you have someone else helping you manage your store's Twitter, though, you should most definitely have one for yourself.

Dear Editor: Can you write something in a future issue about ways to retain customers or things you can do to get people back to your store? You write a lot of good articles about marketing and design, but I'd like to see more about relationships with customers.

—Taylor, Lexington, KY

Taylor, That's a really good idea and we took you up on that suggestion. Check out page 10 for a story on how to keep all those new holiday customers. Giving customers what they want is a sure fire way to gain repeat business, kind of like us answering your question by writing an article based on your suggestion. We hope you stay an eBiz reader for life!

Good questions!

Let us hear from you!

Write to: scotts@solidcactus.com **eBiz**

Navigating Your Path To SEO Success, One Link at a Time

Make it your resolution this year to focus on your website's Search Engine Optimization (SEO). As with any worthwhile advertising or marketing endeavor, planning out your SEO strategy and the route you'll take to get to the top is the first step to success. This article will help you navigate the often mysterious world of SEO, starting with one of the most vital techniques: link-building.

Planning Your Route

By now, you've likely read a few articles on SEO and are starting to plan your 2010 strategy. If link-building isn't on your SEO roadmap, it should be. In the eyes of the search engines, each quality link pointing to your website is a vote in favor of your website. The more quality links, the more likely your site is to rise in search engine rankings and increase the amount of visitors, which ultimately will increase sales.

Onward!

There are many disreputable companies who will guarantee you 50 links in 5 minutes. This makes link-building quick and easy, right? We wish! A link-building strategy that will make a positive impact on your SEO must include only links on sites relevant to your industry, have a good reputation and content on the site, and increased PageRank and monthly traffic numbers over time.

We suggest networking with other non-competing websites and blogs in your industry by calling them up or sending them a completely custom, personalized e-mail introducing yourself, highlighting what you like about their site, and outlining why a link to your own website would benefit their site's visitors. You'll need to give them a reason to link to you, so offer a free product sample for them to review, a write-up about them on your

own blog, or products you can offer their blog readers for a giveaway.

Heard of the term link bait? Link bait is unique content on your site, such as top ten lists or videos, that encourages people to link to the content without you having to ask. This link building strategy should be pursued in tandem with manually networking with other websites and



blogs. Think about what your audience would find interesting or useful about your products, and start writing articles on your website about those topics, post regularly on your blog in a non-sales pitch format, and film short videos on subjects your customers would find useful. Include your website's logo in the video, host them on your site and upload them to YouTube.

Danger Zones

There will be obstacles in your path that can trip up your link-building strategy. Some companies will offer to get you tons of links, but those links will be on irrelevant sites with little to no traffic, directories with zero reputation, and even leaving your site's link in random blog and forum comments without providing any real contribution. Link-building can take some time, but you will be most successful when you stick to manually contacting site owners and beefing up content on your website so it's as link-worthy and

interesting as possible. You could buy a banner ad or sponsored blog post linking to your website, but make sure it is a quality site related to your own.

It's a Two-Way Street

There are two types of links. With one-way links, a website links to yours without you linking back. These are preferred and have the most SEO value. However, sometimes you have to give a little to get a little in link-building. This is done through reciprocal links, where two websites link to each other. This can have a successful impact on your SEO when done in moderation. If you do engage in reciprocal linking, only link out to sites that can benefit and be a useful resource for your visitors. The links should be closely related to the topic of your own website and are sites you would feel comfortable recommending to your visitors as valuable websites to pursue. Stick to linking only to around 20 websites and call your page Resources, Further Reading, or another title that emphasizes the usefulness of these links.

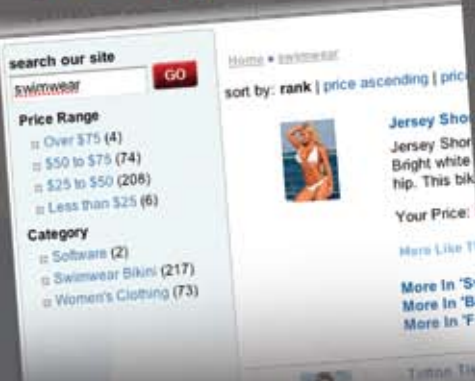
Keep On Moving Along

Like all SEO efforts, link-building is not an overnight strategy. If you're not getting the links and results you want, don't throw your hands up in the air and give up or, worse, succumb to a company who may SPAM your link across tons of irrelevant websites. Instead, tweak your strategy. Keep moving along your SEO roadmap, and you'll arrive at your rankings destination in time! **eBiz**



By Alicia Magda
alicia.magda@solidcactus.com

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Product Reviews Increase conversions

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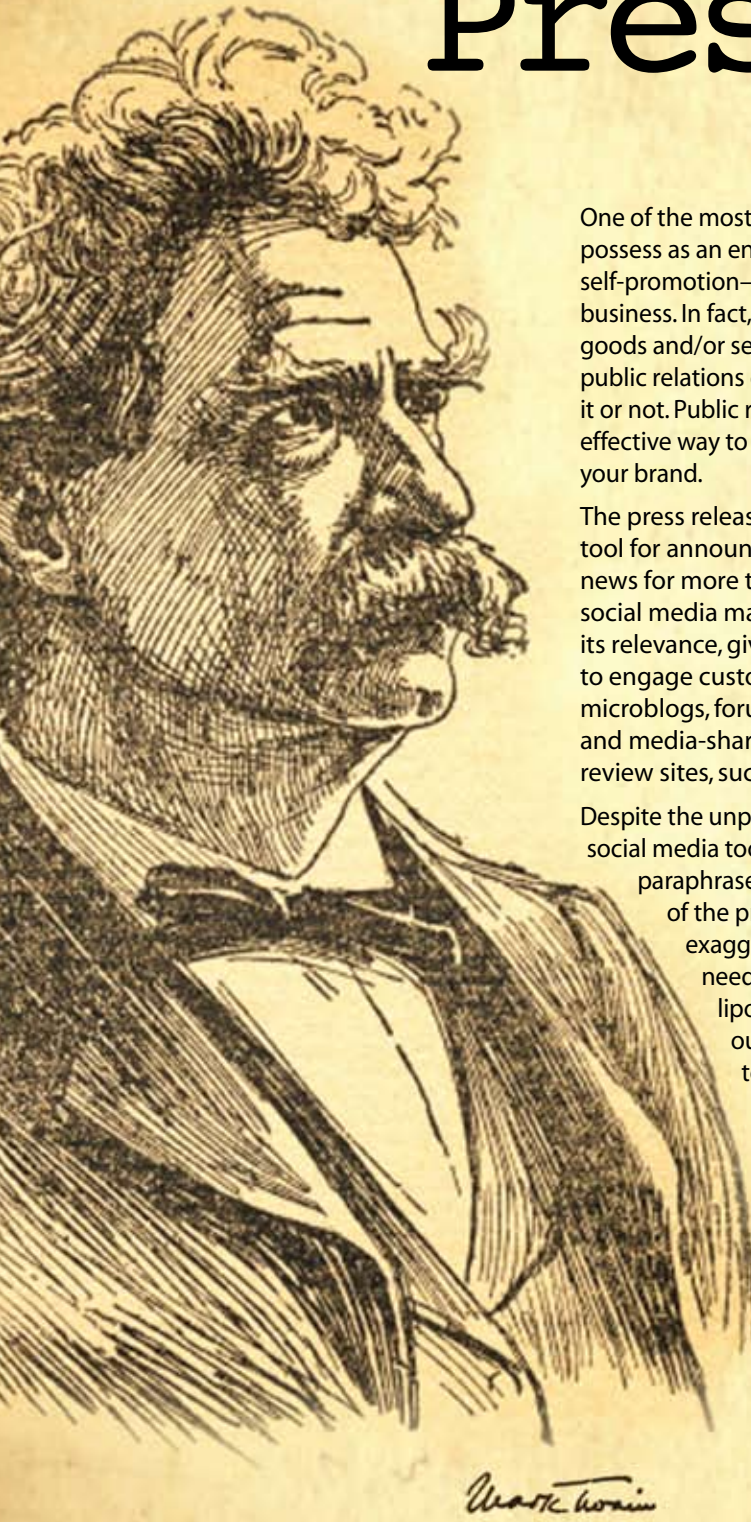
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The “E-evolution” of the Press Release



One of the most valuable skills you can possess as an entrepreneur is the gift of self-promotion—both for yourself and your business. In fact, since you’re selling your goods and/or services to the public, you’re a public relations expert, whether you realize it or not. Public relations offers you a cost effective way to boost sales and establish your brand.

The press release has been the go-to tool for announcing important company news for more than 100 years. Lately, social media mavens have been debating its relevance, given the enhanced ability to engage customers through blogs, microblogs, forums, social networks, and media-sharing sites like YouTube, or review sites, such as Yelp.

Despite the unprecedented number of social media tools now available—and to paraphrase Mark Twain—the rumors of the press release’s death are exaggerated. It’s just had a much-needed face lift and a little lipo. When traditional media outlets were the only game in town, you were dependent on them to publish the releases and promote news. Times have changed.

Your press release now has a life of its own:

Distribution services:

You can choose from a number of distribution services that will push your release to news services. While there are a number of small and/or free online services,

be careful to choose one that won’t SPAM journalists. Going with a reputable, established service also helps insure they’ll hit tier-1 wires. The major players remain: Business Wire, PRNewswire, Market Wire, and PRWeb.

Your website: You can publish your press releases on your website. This is great a resource for your customers, as well as a valuable SEO tool. If you don’t have one, perhaps create a special media center page.

RSS Feeds: Your press release distribution service, as well as many of the search engines (e.g., Google), offer RSS (Real Simple Syndication) feeds. They will push your release to blogs, websites, and individuals. You can also create your own RSS feeds using an RSS feed generator so your target audience can get a direct feed of any releases you issue.

Before we get into the style of your release, let’s take a moment to address substance. How you write a release is important, but WHY you are writing it is even more important. Before you publicly communicate anything, you need to determine your overall PR objectives. A complex plan isn’t necessary, but do consider the following:

1. What is your overall business objective? Come up with a phrase that best conveys what you want to accomplish.
2. Identify 2 – 3 key messages/facts about your business that best support your business objective.
3. How do you want your customers to see you? (e.g., do you want to be seen as the best in your field or the least expensive?)

Once you’ve defined your business

objectives and key messages, you'll want to consider your target audience: media outlets. Different media outlets are looking for different story angles. For example, while Internet Retailer magazine may be interested in announcements that reflect your business's performance or product offerings, you may want to avoid informing them that you're collecting money for the local animal shelter.

All news is good news. In the traditional media era, you were expected to announce only significant news and issuing a trivial release was the equivalent of attending a pool party in a tuxedo. More information is now welcome, now that social media allows us to more regularly engage in two-way communication with our audience. Some journalists say they find most of their material on blogs, not from press releases; but, there's a good chance even those folks circle back to a press release to confirm information.

When it comes to writing your release, the fundamentals still apply a century later:

The headline: As every copywriter knows, five times as many people read your headline as read the content that accompanies it. If you're not selling your service and including your company name in your headline, you're wasting your time. Your headline should also make it easy to find in the search engines.

Content: Write for your customer and the search engines, not the media. Leave out the 50-cent words that mean nothing to your consumer. Include keywords and phrases that your customer would use to find you online.

Links in your press release: Including links in your release points readers to specific pages on your website and can positively impact your website's SEO.

Most importantly, well-crafted press releases can open the door to developing relationships with bloggers and members of the media that write about your industry. They are always looking for a story, so why not give them something to talk about? It can also save you a ton in advertising. These days, especially, that's a good thing. **eBiz**

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By Olga Gikas

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Holiday Year End Review

Blast into 2010



It's the start of not just a new year, but a new decade. So much we're not going to miss, so much to look forward to. Before you stride forward into 2010, spend time looking back over last year's performance highs and lows. The weakest link may be what's been holding you back from record sales.

Website Activity


Google Analytics is the key to unlocking the secrets of your website's traffic. (If you're not already wondering where your traffic is coming from, you better start). To know what needs changing, the first step is to see how well traffic converts from your homepage to

product pages to the almighty checkout. Where were visitors looking, and how long did they stay on your site? How many page views did the average user have? Did your homepage have a high bounce rate? These telling stats can point out if something is potentially wrong with your site's layout. A solid homepage captures attention and creates a call to action. A high bounce rate means you probably didn't have anything compelling on your homepage or worse, a poor design that scared people away. Consistent and effective navigation helps a customer find their way to what they

need. If your site had high page views but not a lot of conversions, this means you were probably sending your potential customers on a virtual goose chase. Messy links, cluttered navigation, and hidden search bars frustrate customers and drive them away. Improving navigation will help get users to pages with the least hits and clickthroughs (or, the ones you've been burying). To get more clickthroughs, consider features like rotating banners or featured items to draw attention to products that are higher performers, and as a bonus, make it easier to change gears from season to season.

Customer Activity

Paramount to any business is turning the average visitor into a valued customer. What's your conversion rate? No matter what it is, there's room for improvement. Even if you are happy with your conversion rate, what kind of businessperson would you be if you didn't want to do better? Use Google Analytics to see what sold your current customers on your products. What pages brought increased conversions? Don't just focus on what worked, but also what hasn't. As much as you love some of your products, if they're not selling on the front page, it might be time to give room to some of your more unsuspected popular products that have been waiting to shine.



Wondering why cart abandonment is so high? Analyze your site for any red flags such as high visitor volume on pages with low selling products and sparse product information. If people are spending time on pages and not converting, it could mean there are questions. Leaving important information unanswered leaves sales unmade. If this is the case with you, your item pages could be weak. Add some spinach to those pages with better product descriptions and photos and clear shipping policies and pricing. A hidden message here may also be a need for your customer service contact information. Many customers in a brick and mortar store may enjoy working with one person throughout the sale, but finding a different clerk at the sales counter can put that customer in an uncomfortable or awkward transition. The same consistency applies to your checkout. There's no reason to lose trust, or even sales, to poor cart programming or inconsistent design. See the sale through from browsing to buying, beginning to end.

PPC and SEO Evaluation

Organic and paid traffic are equally important to any well managed site. pay-per-click (PPC) gets you quicker results, while search engine optimization (SEO) is an always in-progress strategy to increase your organic rankings. Remember moderation is the key with PPC; the money you're putting into ads should have decent return on investment. Evaluate what ads worked and what didn't. Maybe the

headlines worked better in one ad but not in another. Use that same call to action in future similar ads. Remember, PPC is a tricky science; there's nothing wrong with getting professional help in figuring out what best markets your product.

With SEO, use Google Analytics to find out what keywords and phrases are bringing traffic to your site; maybe it's not what you expect. Also, use Google's free keyword analyzer to find out what search terms people are using in your industry. Try incorporating those keywords by describing your services in a new way on your About Us page or updating old product descriptions. If you aren't blogging, start. Put yourself and your expert industry knowledge out there. Adding a blog to your site not only gives you a natural way to include those keywords, but also builds reputability.

Inventory Management

No matter how many new products you have coming in, you should know when your typical inventory sells best. Huge order volume or a sudden surge in sales for a new popular product is great, but both before and after are the time to have a massive inventory restock. Start in the months before the holiday shopping season and keep an eye on those popular sellers. Don't let your site be filled with "out of stock" messages or worse yet, "in stock" when there's nothing in the warehouse to ship (wanna talk about an angry customer?). Keeping track of inventory may be hard during the holidays, but the last thing you want is to be caught with your inventory down. Take a moment to think about how your orders are processed, how you organize your inventory, and what internal processes you have in place to make sure everything is always accurate. Does your inventory management talk to your store? If you find you have a growing problem of managing this, it may be time to look into order management software.

Shipping

How you go about shipping your products is just as important as what you're shipping. Over last year's holidays, did you try any deals like offering gift wrapping or free shipping? Increasing order sizes are one sign of effective shipping offers,

whether they are free or an enticing flat-rate. Your sale prices aren't the only competing factor in drawing in customers. Be aware of competitors' shipping offers and see how yours compare. Falling behind the competition is no laughing matter. Race ahead with superior shipping.

Customer Service

What questions do you notice being asked nearly every time you talk to a customer? Let me rephrase that. What questions are you absolutely tired of answering? Keep track of frequently asked questions. If they're simple to answer, the time saver of a solution is to make the answers readily available on an FAQ page. While you're at it, check out your About Us page. How recent is your information? How easily can customers find out about your business, hours of operation, and contact information? Locating important information all on one page is part of having five-star customer service. And perhaps our most repeated piece of advice: get your toll-free number in your header.

And, speaking of that toll-free number and easily found e-mail address... Did the holidays have you or your staff tied up tighter than a holiday bow with calls and e-mails? Maybe call volume has increased to the point that you lose time for other important tasks, like packaging orders. No matter how busy you are, don't sacrifice one part of your quality service for another. A little delegating might be needed. Reviewing what you did over the past year can help you manage your time better for the new year. Whether devoting too much one-on-one time to customers or not enough, there's always room for improvement with time management.

Either way you look at the new year, it's a fresh opportunity to continue great practices or, better yet, try something new. The tools are out there, what are you waiting for? **eBiz**



By Scott Sanfilippo
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THANK YOU

*Please
Come Again*

Keeping Customers after the Holidays:

How to Turn First-Time Shoppers Into Repeat Buyers

The holiday season is no doubt the busiest time of year for eCommerce. And during this peak season, many people are likely shopping at your store for the first time. Take advantage of this influx of shoppers to turn these new customers into repeat customers.

Repeat customers are the lifeblood of your business. You probably already know it costs more to gain a new customer than to keep an existing one. Your holiday PPC budget continues to pay off all year when you retain customers. That first click may have cost you, but when they return, they will likely go directly to your site rather than clicking on a paid ad. Nifty, huh? Also, satisfied customers become walking, talking billboards, on and offline. Again, free advertising. Finally, growing a good base of loyal customers gives you a great panel to find out what people like and don't like.

Here are a few ways to generate those loyal, repeat customers:

Keep Promotions Compelling

Maybe you gained a new customer because of a great Cyber Monday sale. Continue to give people a compelling reason to buy from you. Sure, some sales will always be better than others, but by being consistent with specials and promotions, that initial excitement of getting a good deal will never go away. Something you had, whether a specific product or a special price, attracted each customer to your store. Keeping things attractive means keeping customers.

Stay In Touch

Stay top of mind. If you think about it, does McDonald's really need to advertise? They still do. Always. Constant ads in every form of media keep the burger chain in our mind at all times. Your approach will be scaled down, of course, but the same practice can be used. Remind your new customers who you are by sending e-mails regularly. Even if customers don't click through every message, just seeing it in

their inbox increases brand awareness.

More specific to keeping holiday shoppers, target a message to only your newest shoppers with a special incentive. Thank them for choosing your store during the 2009 holiday season and provide a coupon code for their next purchase. While you are at it, use this same message to ask customers to follow you on Twitter or become your fan on Facebook if you utilize these outlets. This opens up more lines of communication.

Encourage Sharing with a Contest or Promotion

Going along with a targeted e-mail to your new customers, consider holding a "show us your Christmas morning" pictures or something of that nature. You can post customer pictures and/or video on your website, blog, or social media channel. This will encourage repeat business because people will return to your site to see if their pictures made your site, and while there, check out your latest offers.

Surveys

Getting feedback from people who like to shop with you can help you make informed decisions about your business, from marketing to product line. You could e-mail a survey (also place on your website) using a free tool like Survey Monkey. Ask questions about the customer's shopping experience, such as if they are likely to return to your store, and why or why not. Make it short and don't ask for a lot of information. You could entice customers with a coupon code or entry to win a prize for completing the survey.

Product Reviews

If you do not utilize product reviews on your item pages, put this on your priority list. After the holidays is the prime time to solicit reviews. People likely bought more from you than they would if it were an average order. And, people love to share reactions to gift-giving efforts. Even if items are purchased as gifts, the giver can review items and share why the recipient loved the item -- or didn't. Product reviews can do many things for your business: build customer confidence, increase conversions, help with SEO, and since customers return to your site to review the items, they may make another purchase while there. You could even encourage users to submit a review in return for a coupon code.

Provide Great Service

After the holidays, sometimes people need to return or exchange items. Be sure to handle these calls and e-mails with care and provide quick turnaround on shipping new items. They could be a new customer and it'd be awful to lose them before they had a chance to make another purchase. A good customer service experience like that can go a long way. Also, make good on holiday goofs. For everything good that the holiday season brings, there is also a huge rush and with that, sometimes there are mistakes. If there were any issues with orders at the fault of your store, swiftly address them and offer something to the customer in return as an apology.

Ask For It

This sounds so simple, but do you actually ask for the return visit? As you leave a local



NEW Sequence Banner
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Keep your homepage fresh and exciting with Sequence Banner from Solid Cactus. This JavaScript-based solution sequentially fades from one promotional "slide" to another, calling attention to special offers and giving customers a glimpse inside your store. JavaScript makes for easy editing of slides, too. Optional numbers provide shoppers a way to manually navigate slides, and best of all, it has the capability to include video within banners. Video is a huge conversion tool. Combine that with the power of Sequence Banner, and imagine the results!

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shop, the last thing you may see is a "Thank you. Come again." sign on the door. Add this simple verbiage to your order notification e-mails or packing slips. Encourage your customer service reps who take phone orders to have a scripted sign-off with the same friendly message.

Finding ways to build repeat business is crucial to growing your online store,

no matter what time of year. Use these strategies consistently, but especially when your business sees its highest surges in sales.

eBiz



By Donna Talarico
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10 Tips for Beginner Bloggers

One of the most difficult parts of blogging is actually getting started. You might ask yourself, "What do I have to say?"; "Is it really that important?"; "Who will actually read what I write?"; "The answers to these questions can never be revealed – if you never start blogging.

We've all heard about the benefits of generating fresh content that search engines love, link-worthy posts that get shared across the web, and brand interaction that can only happen in the blogosphere, but what about coming up with an idea and writing good posts? Here are some tips to make sure that your first foray into blogging is successful.

1. Getting Post Ideas

Take a different perspective or provide better information than other blogs in your industry. Think about what topics a reader would find interesting, useful, or relevant about your industry. Do not make your blog a sales pitch. Write about topics that can help your readers, industry news, or ways to use your product. Use the opportunity you have

to connect with your readers by showing you know what you're talking about when it comes to your industry.

Don't risk your reputation by posting controversial, personal, or hostile content – unless that's part of your brand. The blog may be one of the first interactions a customer has with you. Make the interaction count by establishing trust and credibility through engaging, interesting, or useful content.

2. Length and Style

It's best to limit your entries to 150-250 words, as most Internet readers tend to skim. If your topic requires you to be more in depth, you can go beyond 250 words. Keep in mind you can also stretch a complicated topic across several posts, rather than stuffing it all into one entry.

Most blog posts tend to be conversational and informal in tone, although certain industries may need to be more technical or informational. Just remember to give your posts personality. Think of your blog as a lobby for your brand. It has to feel welcoming

and approachable, while still being able to convey all of the useful information visitors need.

3. Formatting

Since most online readers skim, format your post to make it easier to read. Break up text by using paragraphs, subheadings, quotations, bullet points, lists, images, video, and other formats to organize your information in a way that makes it easy and accessible for your readers. Be creative!

4. Write Solid Headlines

The headline is one of the most important pieces of a blog post. Just like your storefront attracts a customer in to shop, a good headline will draw your visitors in. When writing headlines, remember not to shout at or market to readers. Instead, give them something short, sweet, and engaging. Entice them. Use active voice.

5. Using Links Responsibly

Do not use more than a few links in a blog post, otherwise your post will appear like SPAM. Instead, link when necessary and relevant to what you're writing about. Try not to use the phrase "click here" as the anchor



text when linking. Use keywords relevant to your brand as anchor text instead. It's more understandable and can help with search rankings.

6. Use Images

Images can make your post more attractive and, since they break up text, easier to read. Include images that compliment what you're talking about in your post. Also, don't forget to use image alt tags to provide search engines with information on what the image contains.

7. Be Consistent

Daily updates are ideal, but anything less than weekly risks losing readers. Establish a posting schedule so that you keep the fresh content coming. The worst thing you could do is start blogging and then go missing. It becomes embarrassing when a reader comes to your blog only to find the last update is months old. If the company doesn't care enough to update the blog regularly, what does that say about how it values its customers?

8. Proofread, Edit, Proofread Again

There's nothing worse than reading a blog post riddled with grammatical and spelling errors. It's frustrating for the reader and it looks unprofessional. Take time to proofread, edit, and proofread again.

9. Respond to Feedback


Blogs are an excellent customer service tool as they create a more informal environment for customers to voice their thoughts or concerns. Be sure to take the time to respond and interact accordingly.

10. Be Committed

Finally, be committed to your blog. Make the effort to update regularly, develop good content, and be a thought leader in your industry. Practice writing. Read more. Comment and interact on other blogs in your industry. By being committed to making your blog successful, you're already taking the first step towards having a blog that helps your brand, and ultimately, your business. **eBiz**



By Mandy Boyle
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Social Media for Your Business: From Fad to Must-Have

4 Reasons You Should Be on Twitter and Facebook

Happy 2010! Have you resolved to make your business more social this year? This is the year that analysts and pundits predict that business' social media adoption will move from fad to must-have. If you're ahead of the curve, you're already using tools like Facebook and Twitter to connect with your customers. If you still need convincing, here are a few reasons why your business should resolve to go social with Facebook and Twitter:

1. It's Free: Twitter and Facebook are neither the be-all nor the end-all of social media, but they're a lot more cost-effective than a custom WordPress theme or hiring a community manager to moderate a community-oriented microsite. For brands that are hesitant to foray into social media, Twitter and Facebook are the perfect entries into the social space. Not only are they free, but they require comparatively little setup and maintenance time (though, of course, the more you put into them, the more you are likely to get out of them). With ROI and social measurability still called into question by some, free tools can be a powerful tool for proving those dissenting voices wrong. It only takes about 30 minutes of setup and a few minutes a day to keep track of both sites. There's no need to meticulously follow every update in your feed on either Facebook or Twitter.

2. Research and Monitoring: There are no better free tools for analyzing the zeitgeist of the Internet than Facebook and Twitter. They may have a reputation for fueling users' vanity and delivering inane updates about what users are having for lunch, but both Facebook and Twitter can be great tools for research and monitoring.

To start, use Twitter to make an RSS feed to track mentions of your Twitter handle, your brand name, or your top-value keywords; now you have real-time search

results. Twitter and Facebook can be more valuable research tools than a search engine, because it's sharing what people online are actually reading and not the site with the best search engine rankings. Twitter, in conjunction with Google Alerts and other free tools, can be the backbone of a homemade web monitoring center for your brand.

Another useful research application comes from the Trending Topics list found in the right-hand column of Twitter. Looking for topics to blog about or ideas for quirky promotions? Go no further than this list for suggestions. Similarly, links and events shared on Facebook could provide surprising opportunities to create compelling content for your site.

3. Customer Service: According to Ramon DeLeon, Managing Partner of several Domino's Pizza locations in the Chicago area, "The only way to put out a social media fire is with social media water." DeLeon would know; he's been instrumental in dousing potential reputation management blazes on behalf of Domino's before, including one recent incident that resulted in Domino's providing free pizza to the Chicago Social Media Club. Chicago native Amy Korin tweeted that her pizza was late and, when it did arrive, it was the wrong one. The next morning, she woke up to seeing a response from a Domino's digital media specialist saying the store would make up for it with a link to a video apology from the store. Whether through a page on Facebook or a Twitter account, just being there and being active empowers your fans, friends, and customers to interact with you. Hopefully, it's positive interaction, but it's also an effective way to field complaints in an era where shoppers hate long wait times on hold and unresponsive customer service staff.

Be sure to have a comprehensive policy for how to respond to both positive and negative mentions you find online. Scale is an important consideration when choosing what to reply to and how to react, but remember that one of the benefits of social media is its ability to level the proverbial playing field; it's best to have a blanket policy in place to retain a consistent message no matter with whom you're communicating. Hotels are now using Twitter for concierge service and pizza chains let customers place orders via the app. Anticipating your customers' needs and serving them conveniently will win increased loyalty and more customers.

4. Broadcasting Messages: While the main benefits of Twitter and Facebook are based on listening, talking can't hurt either. If you are planning a sale or promotion, let your users know and let them know frequently. In fact, Facebook will let you send a message to your fans. As long as this tactic isn't overused, it can be as effective as the best e-mail marketing campaigns. On average, expect about a 10% clickthrough on the links you share, which can increase awareness for big sales or time-sensitive items.

Using Twitter and Facebook to promote your business is simple, cost-effective, and a no-brainer – you're giving your customers other ways to find your site and more options to contact you. Be sure to interact – share, respond, and listen – and you'll start to see conversions and leads coming from the connections you make on the social web. Start your new year off by getting social with your business. **eBiz**



By Jeff Stolarczyk
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Tech Corner

This month, I take a turn from writing about actual tech gadgets and tips to focus on the effects of using technology, such as smart phones, to share information. Because it's easier to share information, we share more. What does that mean for your privacy?

You don't have to be my best friend to know everything about me. But what you do know is my name and where I work. This may sound scary, but that's all you need to know to build a pretty accurate picture of me. If you Google "Jeffrey Li Solid Cactus", you will be greeted with LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, recent publications, and a litter of outdated blog posts that contain my name. While I don't have much of a footprint on Google aside from these listings, it's enough to help you build a portrait. Despite my attempt to keep a low profile, it is evident from the search results for my name that privacy is lacking when it comes to search engines. The surge created by social media has seemingly made all of us regular Joes into icons, even given us potential to become the next reality television star. Andy Warhol was right; fame is abundant and, with the help of YouTube, our 15 minutes is just a click away.

Facebook and Twitter have also contributed to the erosion of personal privacy. If you think you are sharing information with just people who follow you on these social networks, you are wrong. The personal information we volunteer (and some we don't) is indexed by search engines, making it accessible to the world. An innocent status update like "at Wegmans shopping" is enough information for anyone to search for me in real life in real-time at the Wegmans nearest where I live. Tack on the popularity of iPhones and other GPS-enabled smart phones, each equipped with social media applications and cameras, an innocently uploaded picture or video also broadcasts my location to the world. With technology like these, even seasoned hiders like Waldo are struggling for cover.

Our desire to know everything about everything is facilitated through search engines like Google and our infinite ways to access it. Whether from our phone, computer, television, or car, the information is at our fingertips. 2010 is a promising year for "fame", but at the same time, don't expect much privacy. Your next employer, your next date, your next ... anyone ... can access this information. Don't be caught off guard by the skeletons lurking in Google. Google yourself and see what kind of information about you is out there. Set up a Google alert for your name so you can monitor when and where you are listed. **eBiz**



By Jeffrey Li
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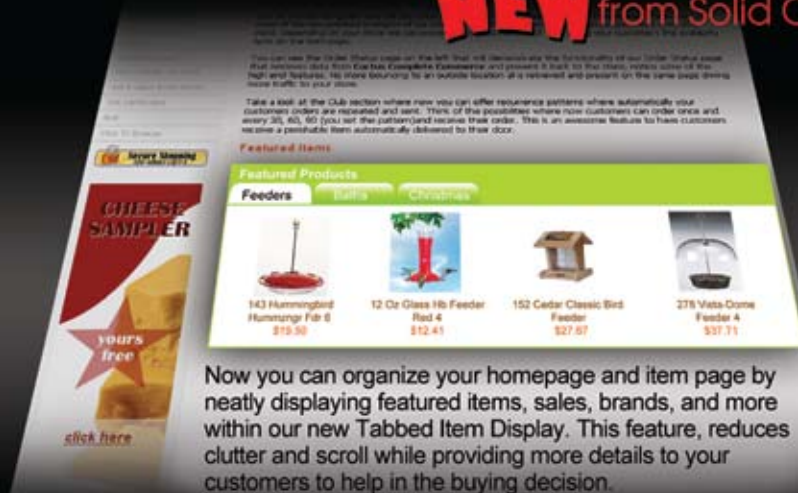
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