

eBiz Insider

the magazine for e-commerce professionals.

On the Ground at *Search Engine Strategies 2009* CONFERENCE & EXPO

—By Bradley Hoppy & Alicia Magda

- ◆ Freudian Tips, Not Slips
- ◆ Are Second Tier Search Engines Right For Me?
- ◆ Top Five Essential Analytics Reports
- ◆ Oh No! When Disaster Strikes...

Special

internet
retailer: 2009 Edition
Conference & Exhibition

Visit Solid Cactus at booth 443. See page 21 for details.

eBiz Insider

the magazine for e-commerce professionals.

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New Friends, New Family Business as Usual

To say the last few weeks have been crazy here at Solid Cactus would be an understatement!

We had our sixth Boot Camp @ HQ which was an overwhelming success. Nearly 40 e-commerce merchants from around the country spent three days learning about Internet marketing, store design, customer service, store features and best practices from Solid Cactus team members. They also had the opportunity to attend sessions put on by guest presenters from Yahoo! Small Business, Google, Best of the Web and MeritCard.

If you're curious as to what went on, go to <http://blog.solidcactus.com> and click on the Boot Camp category for blog posts and videos from the event.

Have You Heard the News?

At the end of April, we announced that Solid Cactus was acquired by the leading provider of online marketing services for small businesses, Web.com (NASDAQ: WWWW).

All of us are excited to be part of the larger Web.com family that now numbers 850 employees across the United States and Canada.

The first thing you may be asking is, "What does this mean for me?" Simply put, it means "business as usual." While we may have a new owner, everything and everyone you know and trust at Solid Cactus is the same.

Our commitment to being a total e-commerce solutions provider remains unchanged, in fact, it's going to become even stronger. David Brown, our CEO, echoed that sentiment in a press release, "The acquisition of Solid Cactus demonstrates our commitment to providing small medium businesses with a broad

range of solutions and domain expertise to help them convert website traffic to sales."

Rest assured, we will continue to design, program and support your e-commerce store today, tomorrow and in the future. We recently introduced eight new products for Yahoo! Store at Boot Camp, and just introduced a ninth, Scratch & Save. No other developer has ever come out with nine new products at one time and we will continue to constantly introduce new products and features to make your store a success.

Finally, I invite you to visit us at the Internet Retailer Conference and Exhibition in Boston, June 15th through the 18th. Stop by the Solid Cactus booth to see what's new. **eBiz**

*By Scott Sanfilippo,
Editor in Chief,
Vice President,
Web.com*



Dear Editor: I keep being told by people that I need to be more involved in Social Media. I always thought that was for personal use, not business, am I missing out?

—Barb F., Long Island, NY

Dear Barb: Simply put, yes! Social Media is a very important advertising channel for businesses to get their message out for free. In this world of viral marketing, it's important that you're taking advantage of Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and other social networking sites. While they were originally designed for personal use, businesses have taken advantage of the opportunities these sites provide. But keep in mind, if you plan on going in and spamming everyone with commercial advertising on a continual basis, you're doing more harm than good. At Solid Cactus, we have a team dedicated just to helping our clients with Social Media Optimization, so when you're ready to move forward and need some professional help, think of us first.

Dear Editor: I read an article you wrote a few years ago about making time to take that first vacation after becoming a small business owner. My wife and I have been running our store non-stop for six years now and we really need to get away. Do you think you can run our store for a week while we lay on a beach somewhere?

—Gary M., Houston, TX

Dear Gary: Pack your bags and grab a cold one, it's time for you and your wife to get away. But before you run to the airport, give us a call because we can help. While I won't be heading down to Houston to mind the store while you're away, our virtual office team at our call center can do just that. Many business owners are coming to us more and more to help them out with administrative tasks such as answering e-mail, interfacing with their vendors and drop shippers, placing orders with manufacturers in addition to handling their inbound customer service calls. We've helped a lot of business owners get away and we're ready to help you too. Visit <http://callcenter.solidcactus.com> for more information on call center and virtual office and don't forget the sunscreen.

Good question!

Let us hear from you!

*Write to: scott@ebizinsider.com **eBiz***

Outbound Calling Campaigns - Do they really work?

What does your post order customer communication say about your business? Are you always on top of the post order e-mails, surveys and communication? Or after the order ships, does that customer just become another conversion number without further follow up? A new service being offered at Solid Cactus Call Center is our Outbound Calling Campaign. With limitless possibilities, the Outbound Campaign reconnects you with your loyal customer base.

Our agents can survey the customer service experience, ask customers their thoughts on a newly released product line, reach out to customers who contacted you with product questions yet did not order, or offer something as simple as a personal "thank you" for the purchase of a product — possibly offering a "Repeat Customer" coupon code on the next order.

As a store owner, you should have clearly defined campaign goals. Are you trying to create buzz about a new product line, offer repeat customer coupons, rate products, or reach out to previous customers? With the understanding of your goals, our team can help mold the program to suit your needs. If your goal is to spread the word about the newest product - we may suggest that you offer a coupon code; with the coupon code, in addition to explaining the latest and greatest addition to your site, we would advise the customers of a special savings coupon they could take advantage of and share with their family and friends. Word of mouth AND a coupon are great marketing opportunities for your store.

The actual operational process of an outbound calling campaign is simple:

1. You provide us with a call database of names and phone numbers.
2. You let us know your specific goals – what is it you hope to gain from this service?

3. Our staff will create a unique script to be used on each call to entice customers to visit your website.
4. A dedicated staff will be assigned to your project with knowledge of your daily goals. During each outbound call, our staff members keep a detailed log regarding the call; we will log calls that go unanswered and attempt to call back the customer the following business day.
5. Your account manager will stay in close contact with you throughout the project, and will e-mail you a daily report containing the calls made that day as well as the results.

Solid Cactus Call Center conducted an outbound calling campaign during the first quarter of 2009 for BigPawDesigns.com, an e-tailer who specializes in accessories such as bandannas and collar charms for today's fashionable pet. BigPawDesigns.com had several goals in mind for this project: capture orders, inform customers about new products that were recently launched, inform customers of recent changes to the wholesale ordering policy - a gracious offer from BigPawDesigns.com, who understands customers feel the crunch during the economic downturn, and most importantly, remain fresh in the minds of customers. These goals were reinforced with e-mail and mailers. During this campaign, our staff focused on calling wholesale customers who have ordered previously and those who had requested information but didn't order.

BigPawDesigns.com discovered multiple successes with this project; most notably, there was an increase in orders placed, and there were more customers who were excited to learn about new products and who were interested in placing future orders. We also helped the client clean up their database,

eliminating businesses that no longer existed, which was 29% of their list! Eliminating that 29% saved future marketing dollars.

Carol Perry, owner of BigPawDesigns.com, passed along some statistics regarding the overall success of the project: approximately 50% of the calls resulted in a message left with an employee of BigPawDesigns.com or a voicemail; 19% of customers who called were excited to learn about the new product lines and said they would be ordering in the near future, and approximately 2% of the calls resulted in a sale either on the outbound call or within 48 hours.

Even though the conversion numbers may seem small, it is a success for BigPawDesigns.com, as generally sales are slow until after a scheduled trade show. The company took into consideration the fact they would not be attending a trade show for another month and needed to find a way to generate interest in the products. In addition to the trade show, BigPawDesigns.com understands they are in a slightly different niche market; the goal isn't a hard sell conversion, but rather the soft sell with long-term conversions.

As illustrated by the BigPawDesigns.com experience, outbound calling keeps your store fresh in your customers' minds; they tell their friends about you and help expand your customer base. Outbound Campaigns can be modified to fit your specifications by calling targeted locations during specific hours and pitching certain products. We can also poll customers to determine a satisfaction rating based upon the ordering process from beginning to end. This includes site navigation, search tools, shopping cart features, delivery time, and overall expectations met. This would provide you with a beneficial view of your business from your customer's vantage point, alerting you to changes that need to be made or features that should be highlighted to help increase your productivity. **eBiz**



By Katrina Domkowski

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Don't Leave Money On the Table. Don't Let Your Customers Hit Voicemail.

Find out how we can
MAKE MONEY for you and
keep your customers happy!

Call Center Services makes owning an online
store easier and more profitable.

Completing day-to-day office responsibilities with our help,
allows you to not only save time, but increase productivity
as well. Avoid over-looked details and small mistakes that
can be performed by an automatic system designed to
correctly and immediately manage your office work.



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and receive
up to

50%
off

“

LivePerson.com was able to categorize our e-mail and our chats. We feel as if we can provide substantially better service to our customers and reduce our operating costs. Plus we have a treasure of information about our customers that we can use in real time to help them decide on products, think about new products and overcome their reluctance at the checkout. For us it was worth the investment.

”

Derek Kleinow - TigerGPS.com

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- ◆ Decrease your costs - Assist multiple customers simultaneously, save money over phone costs
- ◆ Improve your customer service - Give them the service they deserve from a real person
- ◆ Free extra services - Training, consultation, customized graphics

Get started today!

Visit <http://liveperson.solidcactus.com>

LIVEperson

TOOLBOX:

The New Facebook Pages for Business

If you're reading this, the odds are overwhelming that you're using Facebook, as either a personal profile or a page to promote your business. Just getting ready to turn five years old, Facebook is already boasting over 200 million users. The ultimate in trendy social networks is still boasting impressive growth, affecting web browsing trends and helping people connect with their friends and acquaintances on a whole new level. Last summer's debut of Facebook Connect, which lets Facebook users connect with their friends outside of the Facebook site itself, is starting to become more prevalent online.

Facebook gave its look and functionality an upgrade that has fundamentally changed its user experience for regular and business users in March 2009. Fan reaction to the changes has been mixed, but there is no indication that the new look and feel of Facebook is going away. Here are some pointers on optimizing the new Facebook business pages to better connect with your customers and fans.

Business pages on Facebook now resemble personal profile pages, with profile information moving into the left column of the page and the Wall (an area where fans can communicate with you publicly) and the Mini-Feed (an aggregate of status updates and other activities) now dominate the center column of the layout. The most important thing about this change is twofold:

1. Business pages can now make status updates just like every other Facebook profile.
2. Updates will be communicated to your fans as they happen, as well as any new photos, notes or videos uploaded to your account.

Regular updates are a good way to keep fans aware of any news about your online store and are a good way to promote sales, coupon codes and special offers. Try to update your status when your fans are most active to achieve the maximum reach. The nature of the new layout promotes the freshest information; fans with hundreds of friends may not see your news if it isn't made in high-usage periods, which may be late night or early morning for some demographics. As always with social media, don't make every update a sales pitch, and try to interact with your customers when appropriate.

RSS Feeds: RSS feeds can now be published on your profile as Notes automatically. Use the RSS from your blog or a feed of your press releases and share your latest posts or press releases with your fans. These updates can increase traffic on your blog and help to build a community around it. A more active blog community can lead to more activity in your store.

Applications: The changes to the layout mean that pages will have tabs, again like a personal profile. You can add applications to your business page that can allow you to share Twitter updates, among other things. While leaving the most important apps on the main section of the profile, you can move less important ones to the applications tab to present a cleaner presentation for your fans and customers.

Default Landing Page Selection: Fans visiting your page will be shown your Wall and Mini-Feed; however, non-fans visiting your page can be served any tab on your page's profile. Set up a tab to share product videos, for instance,

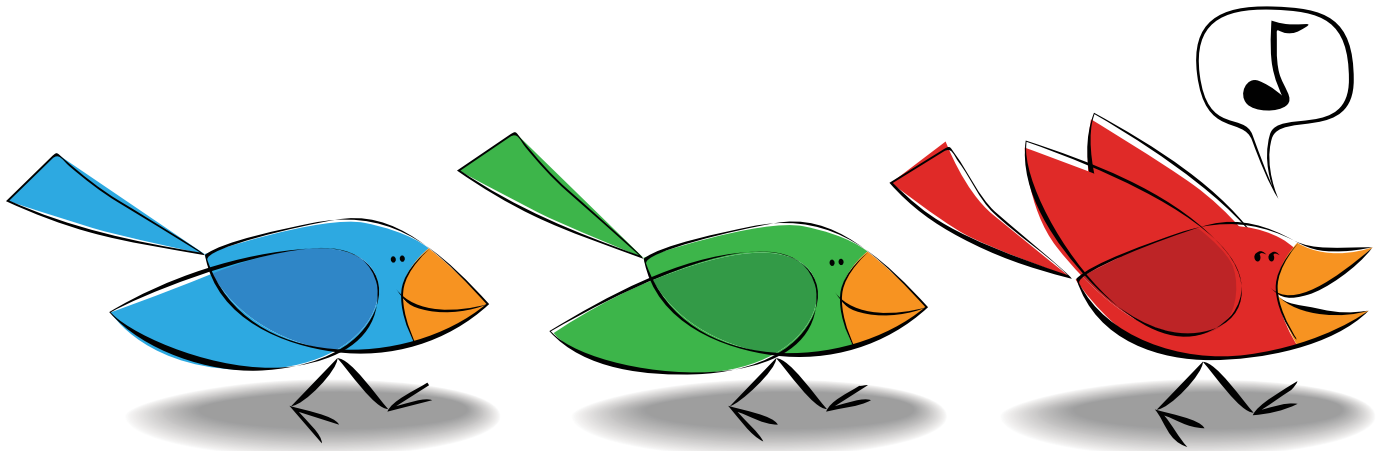
or the information tab showing your contact information, hours and other vital information that prospective customers can use to contact you.

In the past, Pages' limitations often resulted in them becoming a set-it-and-forget-it advertising platform with limited interactivity beyond the discussion application -- a mini-site for your business that did not need frequent content updates in order to function. The new changes mean that more frequent content sharing is likely to be rewarded with greater customer interaction, a higher likelihood of your message going viral, and an increased chance to gain new fans. The downside is that it requires a greater time investment and may be more difficult to track than other traffic-driving referring sites. Even so, Facebook's userbase can't be ignored, and can drive positive word-of-mouth and converting traffic to your store. If you feel lacking in the fan department, consider allocating a portion of your paid search ad spend each month to Facebook's ad platform; Facebook advertising may not be the best option for sending traffic outside of its own network, but there are success stories of paid ads pointing to business and fan pages.

Facebook is still growing and still very buzzworthy. Your customers use it and, if they like your business, they want to interact with your brand there. Knowing the best way to use the "new Facebook" will help you to connect with them. **eBiz**



By Jeff Stolarczyk
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Entrepreneurs lead. Customers follow.

Welcome to the age of Social Media. For the first time, mixing business with pleasure is advised. Businesses of every industry utilize this highly innovative medium to interact with customers and generate new followers, which means simply existing among a virtual world of personalities isn't enough. Social Media success is about optimization, and we're here to optimize.

Start leading today with the Solid Cactus SMO Package

Enhance your presence on Twitter, Facebook, Social Shopping Sites, and Yahoo! Answers. Generate SEO-friendly blog entries and link building, and receive monthly SMO reports to track your progress.

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For example, the research and decision process to purchase a dishwasher is much different than the research and decision process for a t-shirt. In the former case, the research stage typically lasts much longer than in the latter situation. Multiple people may be involved in the decision process for a dishwasher, while it is likely only one person is making the decision for a t-shirt purchase. Since the dishwasher will likely last a lot longer than the t-shirt, and since the price is reflective of such, the decision process will also differ quite a bit.

Another factor to consider is: At what stage in the buying cycle is the consumer? If the individual is in the early stages (research), you first need to attract attention and then continue the momentum to generate interest. If the individual is at the end of the buying stage (purchase), you need to cultivate the desire enough to precipitate action and convert the sale.

Your marketing message should be tailored to suit your target market. It must also speak to the stage at which the consumer exists in the buying cycle. Value propositions are often used in marketing; a value proposition is some sort of persuasive promotion such as a free shipping offer, a discount, a free item, etc. However, if you have a great value proposition, but the prospect is not yet ready to buy, your message is falling upon deaf ears. On the other hand, if you have a marketing message with a goal of simply attracting attention and your prospect is ready to buy, you may miss the sale because you were sending the wrong message.

Once the purchase has been made, consider the loyalty factor of the customer.

Lee also provides the following sequential stages of the Customer Life Cycle: Reach, Acquisition, Conversion, Retention, Loyalty.

Ask yourself the following key questions to determine the likely repeat order rate of the customer:

- Will the purchase be a one-time occurrence?
- Will the customer return again and again?
- Will the individual refer friends and family?
- Is the customer an influencer?
- What is the "lifetime value" of the customer?

Once again, we need to take into consideration the nature of the product. If your store sells wedding dresses, it is likely that customers will not return to the site very often. But, if the bride-to-be purchases her wedding gown (conversion) from your site and e-mails her friends about it, you are gaining free traffic through viral marketing, which is the online equivalent of word-of-mouth marketing.

Now, if our bride-to-be purchases shoes for her wedding (conversion) from your online shoe store and is pleased with her purchase, it is likely that she will not only tell friends and family about her experience, but will return to the site in the future (retention) to make other shoe purchases. In fact, eventually, she may shop exclusively (loyalty) at your store for shoes.

Be sure to leverage your value propositions and advertising messages based upon the following:

Who is the shopper?

Consider demographics. Are you speaking to a female who may respond to messaging centered around emotion? Are you speaking to a blue collar worker who is primarily interested in low prices? Is your customer a business rather than an individual? Keywords, diction and messaging must appeal to your target market.

What is the item or product category?

Be sure your message tone is appropriate for what you are selling. Are you selling sports merchandise? Ads and promotions

may have a fun, upbeat feel to them. What if you offer high-end cosmetics? Advertising should reflect a classy, refined message. Do you sell adult entertainment items? Advertising will convey...well...let's leave that to Freud!

When does the shopper need the item?

Is your prospect still researching options? General keywords and messages tend to capture traffic that is not yet ready to convert. For example, if you sell televisions, a consumer in the early stages of the buying cycle may search a term such as **LCD TV's**. However, a consumer near the later stages of the buying cycle may search a term such as **Sony 40" LCD HDTV**.

I'm sure Freud wasn't referring to marketing in the opening quote of this article, but if you employ some of the tips discussed, you'll have a better chance at that "lasting existence" to which he referred rather than the slips (and I'm not talking about the Freudian variety) many advertisers experience! **eBiz**



By Robyn Snyder
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Catch an e-Tailer

catchmenow.ebizinsider.com

A graphic featuring a vibrant orange and red chameleon perched on a thin wooden branch. Below the chameleon, the text "Catch an e-Tailer" is written in a bold, black, hand-drawn font. At the bottom of the graphic, a red arrow points to the right, containing the URL "catchmenow.ebizinsider.com" in white text.

Attitude is Everything: Surviving the Economic Storm



In our office, we have a wall dedicated to the employee of the month in each of our departments. The quote by Ralph Marston, posted on the wall, reads, "Excellence is not a skill, it's an attitude."

In planning this article, I reached out to some store merchants and posed the question "what are you doing that's helping you stay successful despite the bad economy?"

When I sent the question out, I expected to read feedback such as "cutting prices," or worse, "cutting staff". I thought I'd be writing a list of the Top Ten ways to stay afloat or something of that nature. I'm pleased to say that what I received was far better. I did receive some good business management tips but I think the bigger message I received and the common theme from everyone I heard from; when it comes down to surviving the bad economy, Attitude is Everything!

Tim Fossett of CrescentHarborLighting.com stated, "We are in control of our own destiny. Come hell or high water, we will succeed."

Fossett has maintained his staff and has even provided them with raises and bonuses in spite of the economic downturn. Fossett feels it's easy to motivate his team if they feel appreciated personally and professionally.

Fossett's response reminded me of another example of a company keeping a positive attitude and it's right here at Solid Cactus. For those of you that have ever attended a Solid Cactus Boot Camp, you've witnessed firsthand the enthusiasm and passion of the entire staff. People here love what they do. Day after day we receive e-mails with kudos to team members who went above and beyond to help a client or even a fellow employee. We work late, we work weekends and we do it for more than just a paycheck. We do it because our company's culture is like no other. We're all working toward the same goal; to be sure Solid Cactus is the best name in e-commerce by helping our clients succeed. That is the attitude that keeps a business strong, regardless of the economy.

Aside from a strong sense of teamwork, we enjoy some perks such as a gymnasium complete with basketball nets, a ping-pong table and dodge balls. We have an in-house café and flexible work schedules but I think more importantly, everyone has a voice and

an opportunity to shine and be recognized for their contributions.

Granted, I realize that a positive attitude isn't enough to keep things on track; you have to make wise business decisions. You need to watch your finances like a hawk but that doesn't mean you should be afraid to spend money on investments that can improve your situation. Too often, the first reaction for merchants during a down economy is to cut their marketing spending, but a decision like this really works against you.

Pam Macharola of BlairCandy.com has been taking advantage of her competitors' spending fears. She explained, "They're turning down their ad spend and we're turning ours up. We're also changing our PPC advertisements to keep them fresh and using humor to attract more customers. As a result, we're getting better placement and increased sales." Macharola loathes the negativity in the media and says, "Right now the economy is my only competition, not the other stores."

Macharola's point is excellent. The media seems to work overtime to provide us with a self-fulfilling prophecy that the economy will get worse and worse. They tell us not to spend our money and then make news of how people aren't spending enough to help the economy. Want to keep a positive attitude? Turn off the news! Don't read the paper...just stay passionate about your business.

Avoid the doom and gloom personalities. When you decided to start a business, you did it because you had a dream and a passion. The media didn't need to tell you the economy was in the right place to go into business for yourself. The media didn't start your business. With the right attitude, they won't destroy it either.

Be sure you have the right attitude and surround yourself with winners. It's not just about having people, it's about having the right people. Keep everyone's spirits up by motivating them to be a part of something bigger than a paycheck. Attitude is everything and continued success starts with you. **eBiz**



By Gregory Davis

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Are Second Tier Search Engines Right For Me?



Are you fed up with the big dogs in search? Google getting you down? Yahoo! and MSN giving you grief? You don't have to sit there and take it any more! The Big Three aren't the only search engines in town, so if you haven't tried second tier search before, now is a good time to start!

There are a lot of fantastic search engines that offer Pay-Per-Click (PPC) advertising. Google, Yahoo! and MSN take the lion's share of the market, but you shouldn't limited yourself just to those. Smaller "second tier" search engines can be an excellent supplement to your growing search marketing strategy. Additionally, if you find that your particular industry is saturated across the larger search engines, it may be impossible to bid for the first page and make a profit. Often less competition on the smaller engines means you can bid effectively at a cheaper price. Regardless of your reasons, it's a good idea to test out smaller search engines from time to time. There are some pros and cons to working with smaller engines, so let's take a look at both.

The Positives

Less competition - Second tier search engines often have less advertisers, which means you don't have as much competition to fight with over ad space. Many times, small business owners don't expand beyond Google, Yahoo! or MSN. Use this to your advantage!

Lower costs - This goes hand in hand with the lower amount of competition. When a particular market is saturated on the big search engines, the average cost per click of those keywords will often go up as advertisers try to gain position over the huge number of competitors. With less people to compete against, you may find that your cost per click is lower, which means you can drive more traffic for the same amount of money.

Vertical specific advertising - Vertical search engines (or specialty search engines) are still relatively new in the search scene. These engines focus on a specific type of content, like Business.com. If your product appeals to a specific demographic, start looking for search engines that focus on your niche, whether it be construction or the medical profession. The searchers using those engines will be pre-disposed to your message, which may help your bottom line.

The Negatives

Tracking limitations - One of the biggest issues you'll encounter with smaller search engines is how to measure your success. Most of the second tier engines don't offer any type of conversion tracking, which makes it hard to refine and optimize your campaigns. You can work around this by using track links or tagging your URLs.

Low traffic - The volume of traffic coming through second tier engines is much less than Google. If you're looking for something to replace your accounts on the "Big Three",

this isn't going to do it. Think of second tier search as a supplement to your current marketing instead of a replacement to your current PPC.

Click fraud - Click fraud is a type of Internet crime that occurs when a person or automated script clicks on your ad in order to generate cost. While all search engines are aware of the issues and try to combat them, Google, Yahoo! and MSN are the most pro-active in their approach. If you feel you were the victim of click fraud, you might have a harder time getting a refund from a second tier search engine.

While there are some issues with second tier search engines, you can find work-arounds for most of these. You won't know how well a search engine can perform for you until you try it, so start shopping around and give it a try! **eBiz**



By Jean Lloyd
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Popular Second Tier Search Engines

Ask - Ask can almost be considered a first tier search engine. It's a good place to get your feet wet if you're hesitant to try smaller search engines. It still gets some ads fed to it through Google's search network, so you may already be on Ask and you didn't even know it! Ask also just launched their own conversion tracking code.

AOL Search - Like Ask, AOL gets some ads fed to it through Google, but AOL has its own platform that you can advertise on if you'd like to focus in specifically on their market.

Looksmart - This engine is set up in a very similar fashion to Ask. They partner with sites like ABCsearch.com and the CNET network.

Business.com - Business.com focuses exclusively on business buyers online. If you're a

B2B business, this is the search engine for you!

Miva - Another program that's similar to Ask and Looksmart. They distribute their ads to a variety of partner sites.

SearchFeed - Partners with a variety of web properties that your ads may show on.

Advertise.com (formerly ABC Search) - They partner with a lot of bigger search partners such as Ask and Yahoo!, but also drive traffic from sites such as hotbar.com and Bravenet Media.

AdBrite - AdBrite supports banner ads in addition to traditional text ads. They have a variety of properties in their network that include Vh1, Digg, Woman's Day and Ebay.

Survey Says

In March of 2009 we sent a survey to our customers to find out what some of the pain points were and establish just what strategies our customers are using to succeed in a questionable economy. I appreciate everyone's participation. We received great feedback, thus showing that Solid Cactus has the best community of customers a company could wish for.

The results were interesting, as the responses show that many of you are very attuned to best practices to help your business succeed. However, as expected, there were some answers that threw up a red flag. I want to share some of those responses with you and offer a few solutions.

First, in the survey we asked: *On your store, what options do you give for customers to contact you?*

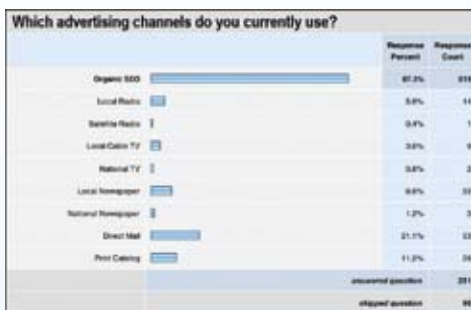


I wasn't surprised to see that 95.7% of you use e-mail as a way for customers to contact you; however, I am concerned that only 60% use a phone number. Granted, I'm happy to see that we're over the 50% mark, but that's still a big gap for a customer service tool that can be the difference between making or breaking the sale.

The Solid Cactus Call Center sees phone calls lead to sales on a daily basis. In April of this year we saw just one phone call amount to a \$9,000 sale for a client. What do you think the odds are that a sale like that would happen over e-mail? E-mail is a great tool for customers to reach out to you but if it's your number one vehicle for customer communication, chances are, it's costing you sales. Our Call Center has solutions for just about any need. If you need someone to answer calls after hours or on weekends or to take all your calls, we can help. Our Virtual Office Service can also help you with

administrative needs (such as answering that e-mail sitting in your inbox). Visit <http://callcenter.solidcactus.com> to find out more.

Two more questions caught my attention because the responses show a disconnect in marketing strategies. In one question we asked: *What advertising channels do you use?*



Over 87% of you use organic Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to promote your site, which is not surprising. However, in a later question we asked "Do you have a blog? How often do you update it?" Over 60% of you responded that you don't have a blog at all and of those that have a blog, only 7% of you said you update your blog more than once a week.



If 87% of you are using SEO, but only 7% of you are actively using a great SEO strategy like blogging, we have a problem. Blogs are just one piece of Social Media that can increase your organic visibility. If you're going to rely upon SEO, be sure you have a good strategy in place. I would recommend an SEO evaluation to see what's working well for you and to identify what opportunities you're missing. Solid Cactus has managed SEO and Social Media Optimization (SMO) services if you don't

have the time or resources to properly nurture your SEO. Visit <http://evals.solidcactus.com> to learn more about our evaluations.

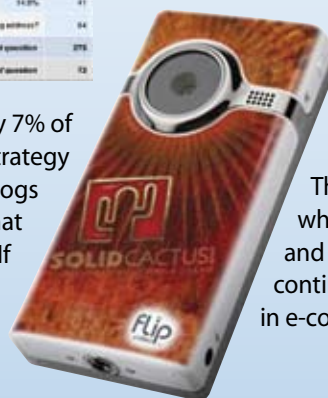
One more question that I want to highlight is "How do you process orders?" Over 63% of you do it manually in the backend of your Yahoo! Store. With multiple drop-shippers or warehouses, this is a very time-consuming aspect of running your business. You should really consider a backend order management system such as Cactus Complete Commerce for processing your orders. You can automate your order processing and free yourself from other aspects of your business. There's no software to load, there are built-in wizards to make product setups easy, and it's a very affordable solution for running your Yahoo! Store. Find out more at <http://www.cactuscompletecommerce.com>.



Again, everyone at Solid Cactus appreciates your participation. Information such as this is vital to know so as we develop and market products, we know just what our customers are seeking.

The final part of the survey was a drawing to win a limited-edition Solid Cactus Flip Mino HD. I'd like to congratulate Doug Duguay from Bicycling Hub and Ron Gehard from Apar Services.

Thank you to everyone who completed our survey, and we look forward to continuing to be your partner in e-commerce success. **eBiz**



By Gregory Davis
gregory.davis@ebizinsider.com

Tune Up Time

How is your
business running?

Check Your Gauges

When was the last time you checked under the hood of your website? Browser updates, older code and outdated business strategies may be creating revenue issues you're not aware of. Before planning where to take your business next, take a step back and find out where you are now. Uncover the strengths and weaknesses of your websites appearance and functionality with a **Solid Cactus Site Evaluation**.

If it's traffic you're worried about, find out how to improve your marketing strategy with **SEO** and **PPC Evaluations**. Don't miss an opportunity for improvement—Give us your keys.

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On the Ground at **Search Engine Strategies 2009** CONFERENCE & EXPO



Search Engine Marketing Experts Tote Social Media

I packed my bags and headed out to learn about advanced Pay-Per-Click techniques at SES-NY. While the PPC skills I learned were certainly valuable, nearly every workshop ended with a comment about social media being the future of the industry. I quickly came to realize that there are many more marketing avenues for small businesses that don't include paid search ads on Google, Yahoo! and MSN. In fact, Twitter and Facebook are now on the forefront of developing some of the strongest marketing channels on the Internet today.

With my curiosity piqued, I joined a session entitled, "Social Media Marketing for Brand Building," that focused on new

Getting Back to SEO Basics at SES

This year's Search Engine Strategies conference in New York City was back to basics. While SES-NY included technical workshops exploring advanced SEO tactics, such as understanding how search engines really view duplicate content and the importance of social media, there was a greater emphasis on ensuring site owners have the SEO basics down.

After all, if your foundation is weak, the house will crumble.

Staying on top of the latest trends is vital in our industry, and Internet marketing conferences like the recent Search Engine Strategies – New York (SES-NY) ensure we stay on top of our game as industry experts.

e-commerce stores and how to get people to know you exist. Brand building is one of the most important steps in developing a successful online marketing plan. With the Internet filled with people of all ages, ranging from children to senior citizens, expanding your marketing strategies to appeal to such a wide user-base can be very difficult and costly.

Many marketers see social media as being synonymous with socialization - and to help establish brand loyalty, you need to develop a social web. Social webs allow you to have direct insight on your market, products, and shopping experience by having the ability to look at exactly what people are saying about your business. Twitter and Facebook profiles allow you to develop and expand social webs by inviting friends and customers to follow your company in a fun and interactive way. These sites are great for expanding brand awareness by giving your business a personality of its own in even the most competitive markets.

The following strategies were highlighted as top Best Practices for SMO Brand Building:

- **Determine your target audience** and then incorporate a “tone” that will best influence your customers. Being more personable is the best approach for social networks. When interacting with people online, they don’t want to be subjected to excessive advertising or annoying ploys. People must identify with your brand – the first step to obtaining lifetime customers.

...Twitter and Facebook are now on the forefront of developing some of the strongest marketing channels on the Internet today.

- **Starting on the right path is essential.** Even choosing a username can have far reaching impact. Always represent yourself and your company in a professional manner. One great approach is to utilize your name along

with your brand in the same title for a more personal touch. For example, if you read our eBiz Forums, you may notice my username as Cactus_Brad, which closely associates my name with our company.

- **Be sure to engage your audience** daily and initiate discussions around your brand. If fans and followers have a question or suggestion, answer it promptly. Keep things interesting, and vary your style to gauge what reactions are sustainable with your customers.
- **Most important of all, don’t bombard your customers with useless information.** It takes a lot of time and effort to gain somebody’s trust and interest online, but that can disappear in an instant if you come off as pushy or irrelevant. **eBiz**



By Bradley Hoppy

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There were several sessions about the importance of site content and copy, one of the must-haves in a successful SEO campaign. The speakers at SES highlighted the need to make the content as engaging as possible. Gone are the days when a site owner could simply follow a formula for inserting keywords into copy. Copywriters now need to have the writing skills of a seasoned journalist, and the expertise of an SEO veteran.

Creative copy isn’t just great for search engines, but also for link building. A site will be much more inclined to link to that interesting content on your site rather than a site that lacks personality in its copy. We

all know link building can be quite the daunting task, so taking the time to write creative SEO copy can give your site a jump-start on link building.

SEO content’s job doesn’t stop there - it also can make or break your Social Media Optimization (SMO) campaign. Your SMO campaign needs to be full of personality and portray your brand, and it’s typically the content that does it. Think of Twitter.com - if you accidentally sound abrasive in a post, you can lose followers and even interest in your brand. The same goes for your Facebook Business Pages; be sure your information is genuine and conveys how unique your brand is.

Search Engine Strategies covered a variety of interesting topics – some a refresher and a welcome update, with other topics providing a fresh perspective or angle to provide our clients with even more SEO success. As Internet Marketing professionals, Brad and I will be adapting to the always evolving digital advertising agency, and conferences like SES help shed light on emerging trends and new avenues to explore for our clients. **eBiz**



By Alicia Magda

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Top Five Essential Analytics Reports

So, your website has been live for over a year now, you're cranking out ad dollars to Google and Yahoo! for Pay-Per-Click (PPC), Shopzilla and NexTag for Comparison Shopping Engine (CSE) traffic, and you're paying commissions to your affiliates through Commission Junction and Share-A-Sale. But your sales aren't what they should be. While your store is bringing in customers via buyer-specific keywords and from trusted partners, you know you can do better.

In the marketing world we often find that traffic isn't the issue, but rather, it's the small aspects of a website that when tweaked and optimized properly, can lead to some pretty amazing results.

On the other hand, sometimes it is the traffic. You may have well-written ads or an excellent call-to-action, but the traffic isn't there. Maybe your advertising is attracting the wrong demographic for your products. Maybe the colors, theme or navigation of your website aren't as customer-friendly as they could be. Maybe you're targeting very price-sensitive shoppers and they find your prices to be too steep. It could be a million things, and honing in on those items can be tricky, but that's where Google Analytics (GA) can help.

If you've heard me speak or present before, or read any of my blog posts or articles, you know I'm a pretty big analytics fan. There are five essential Google Analytics reports that you should look at everyday!

Before we begin, just remember, you should never use any analytics package as an accounting tool due to the margins of error. You also should have the e-commerce section of GA activated.

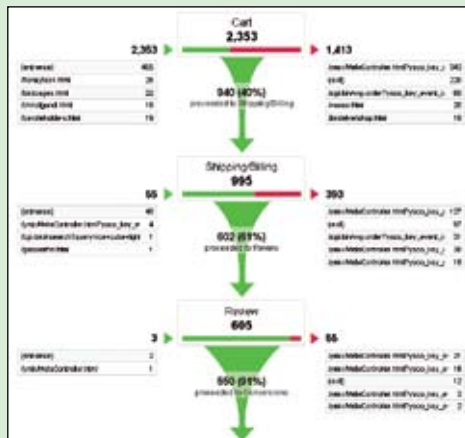
Now, let's take a look –

1. All Traffic Sources E-Commerce Report

- Found Under – Traffic Sources, All Traffic Sources, E-commerce Tab

This report allows you to very quickly understand which traffic sources are sending you traffic that is actually

converting into a sale. You may be acquiring traffic “and if you're paying for that traffic” you are most certainly going to want it to convert. We find the average e-commerce conversion rate to be between one and three percent. All of these metrics are fully sortable, so if you want to look at top visits, highest sales medium or highest average order value, you can find it all there.



Solid Cactus can help you analyze your cart flow to understand where customers are dropping out and how you can optimize your cart to reduce abandonment!

2. Content By Title Report

- Found Under – Content, Content By Title
- This is one of my favorite reports since it shows in very clear English which pages are getting the most traffic, their respective bounce rates (anything below 40% is pure gold), time on site and dollar index. This report also helps you isolate those pages to which you should (or should not) send traffic. And, if the metrics don't look to rosy, then you've found the first few pages to begin optimizing and tweaking.

3. Purchase Funnel Visualization Report

- Found Under – Goals, Funnel Visualization

This report shows the process flow inside of your shopping cart (and in which areas traffic is abandoning your cart). This report is going to be broken

into the same number of steps under which your cart is established. If your cart has four steps, then you'll see four buckets, if you have three steps, then you'll see three buckets, etc. From this report, you can see at which step the bulk of your customers are leaving. This data can provide you with some excellent action steps! These steps could suggest to lower your shipping price, redesign your cart and so on...

4. Hourly Revenue Report

- Found Under – E-Commerce, Total Revenue, Graph By Hour

One truly underrated report! If you have a smaller ad budget to work with then this report is your best friend! It very clearly isolates your top selling times; understanding this helps you to determine at which times you should and should not be advertising.

5. Visits To Purchase Report

- Found Under – E-Commerce, Visits To Purchase

This report is extremely important to understanding how many times it takes customers to visit your site before they buy. Sometimes, depending upon the item's cost, demand, and availability – it takes more than one visit to purchase this item. Perhaps a customer visits your website, checks prices or shipping options, then visits some of your competitors only to return two more times before buying on the third visit. This is key to knowing the length and duration of your buying cycle. PPC or CSE cookies can be lost after one or two visits, so understanding the elongation of the funnel can help to understand your traffic sources and customer behavior.

Next month we'll explore five more essential analytics reports. Stay tuned! **eBiz**



By Michael C. Jozaitis

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Numbers, Graphs and Stats Oh My!

Google Analytics is an extremely useful tool in understanding your site's performance, learning where your customers are coming from and finding out where your site needs improvement, but the detailed reporting is often difficult to interpret. Overwhelming numerical data can be confusing and often leaves you scratching your head for answers. Oh my!



Stop Scratching Your Head!

Solid Cactus specialists are here to help. During a Google Analytics evaluation, we will provide professional insight into how to optimize your business based on the data. Let us translate the brain-boggling numbers into helpful recommendations regarding Marketing, Content, or Conversion Flow.



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Have No Fear, Our New Products are Here.

During the latest Boot Camp @ HQ, our clients enjoyed a first glimpse of our newest products. If you weren't one of the lucky ones who attended our sold-out event, have no fear; you can read all about our new products here or you can check out <http://blog.solidcactus.com> for the new products webinar held by Scott Sanfilippo.

Product Scroller

The first of these products is the *Product Scroller*. Every online merchant wants to show as many products as possible on their website. Sometimes, though, this causes your homepage to be overpopulated and can cause the need for customers to scroll down the page to see all you have to offer. Product Scroller keeps your products within that prime real estate known as "above the fold". This product is also customizable for your colors and borders to match your site. And, it's Search Engine Optimization (SEO) friendly!



Dynamic Sales Page

Dynamic Sales Page is another of the great new features. Shoppers love a bargain but don't want to scroll through pages of products to find one. The Dynamic Sales Page places all of your sale items in one place. It used to be that populating a sales page was quite a chore—a lot of cutting and pasting item ids in hopes of not missing anything. With the Dynamic Sales Page, any item in your store that has a sale price is automatically added to the Sales Page, thus eliminating the need to cut and paste all those items into a new section page! Easier shopping for your customers and easier populating for you...sounds like a win-win situation, don't you think?

Recession Buster features

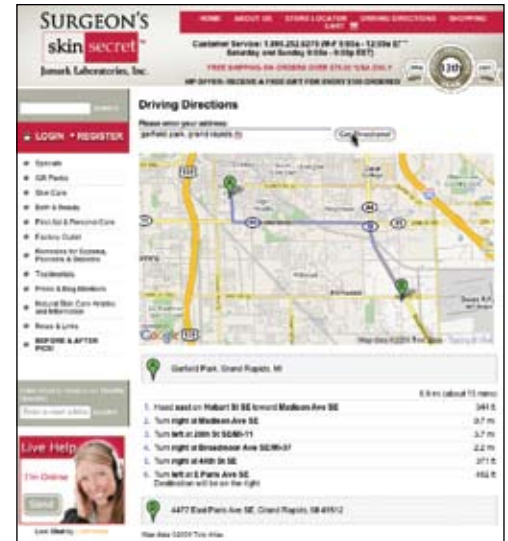
The next products are the Recession Buster features: *Recession Buster Quote Form* and *Recession Buster Dynamic Pricing*. Solid Cactus first used Recession Buster on its own website. The Recession Buster was such a hit with our clients they were asking us how they can purchase the feature for their own websites. We believe you have to give the people what they want, so here it is...Recession Buster for your website! The first is the *Recession Buster Quote Form* which gives your customers the ability to negotiate a price online. Customers are asked on the Quote Form to submit their budget for a particular item and an e-mail is sent to you with that request; you only need to respond to that e-mail with an acceptance, denial or even a counter-offer. Even if the result is not a sale, you've captured their name and e-mail address and you can continue to market to that potential customer.

The second Recession Buster feature is the *Dynamic Pricing* which works like an online auction. Your customers can make a bid on a product based upon the price you set, and the bid can be accepted or rejected based upon the pre-set amounts you decide. You can also limit the number of bids that can be placed. You don't really want customers bidding until they find the perfect price so you can, for example, limit the number of bids to three or four. After the set number of bids, if the customer hasn't met your required amount, you can let the customer know what price you will accept, and the customer then has the option of accepting that offer. You're still giving a discount and still making the sale.

Store Locator & Driving Directions

If you own a brick and mortar store or sell your products via resellers, this next product is for you! The *Store Locator* and *Driving Directions* allow your customers to find your brick and mortar store without leaving your website. Store Locator allows your customers to search for your store by

zip code and desired mileage. With *Driving Directions*, customers can obtain directions to your store from your website; they don't need to venture to a mapping website.



Randomly Displayed Testimonials v2.0

Randomly Displayed Testimonials v2.0 is another of the products rolled out at Boot Camp. *Randomly Displayed Testimonials* allows your customers to read the great testimonials you receive from happy shoppers. The testimonials rotate while your customers shop, and if they see one they like they can click "Read More"; they are then taken directly to that testimonial on your testimonial page.

Mega Drop Down menu

Mega Drop Down menu allows your customers to view sub-sections and sub-sub-sections on your website. They can view images of your products, you can flag sections that have sale items, and you can set the number of columns that appear, too. It's a great way to show your sub-sections when your customers hover over a section. All the deeper sub-levels are now visible. **eBiz**



By Karen Snyder

karen.snyder@ebizinsider.com

NEW PRODUCTS

from Solid Cactus for your Yahoo! Store

FOR BETTER SALES

Each NEW feature improves the customer experience, increases order size, reduces cart abandonment and makes it easier for customers to see your products and better understand their options.



Recession Buster Pricing (RBP) Quote Form

- RBP allows your customers to submit a bid that is in their budget to pay for your product. You can follow-up with the customer to either accept or deny their offer price.



Recession Buster Pricing (RBP) Dynamic Pricing

- RBP allows you to negotiate with your customers without the need to follow-up with customers. You can determine how many bids you want to allow and if the customer bids too low, RBP determines the new price dynamically.



Product Scroller

- Display several products on your homepage in a single row instead of pushing your product below the fold. This is ideal if you have several featured products on the homepage.



Mega Drop Down Menu

- Uses the same functionality of a cascading nav but allows your customers to view deeper levels of your sub-sections or sub-sub-sections, also displays images and text.



Store Locator with Driving Directions

- Brick and mortars can use this feature to direct online shoppers to a store in their neighborhood. Shoppers enter a zip code and results are displayed along with a Google Map.

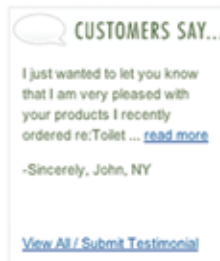


Driving Directions

- Avoid customers leaving your store to search for directions to your brick and mortar stores! This feature will keep all of the information within the shell of your site so it's a seamless process.

Randomly Displayed Testimonials v.2.0

- Displays a new testimonial within a designated area every few seconds. Pulls testimonials dynamically from a testimonials page on your store making them SEO friendly.



Dynamic Sales Page

- Allows you to create a "Sale" or "Clearance" section on your Yahoo! Store. This section will be dynamically populated with any product in your website that has a sale price. Very little work for you and now you have a great new section populated and ready to go.





Oh No! When Disaster Strikes...

A product recall. A takeover.
A technical glitch. An investigation
by the attorney general. Bad press. A
“yourproductsucks.com” website.

Any of these events have the potential to
destroy what you’ve built. How you handle
it will make or break your business.

There are many types of crisis situations, but
most fall into one of these categories:

- **Messes you’ve gotten yourself into** – You promised delivery of 1,000 bedazzled vests by Thursday without checking to see if that many are available. Now the Red Hat ladies can’t march in the parade and you have a major customer service crisis.
- **Functional Boo Boos** - Your chocolate chip cookie mix included too much vanilla and not enough brown sugar. The blech factor is high. What happened to your quality control? This is a crisis of function.
- **The case of mistaken identity** – a company that sells something that is “almost” the same as yours has a catastrophe. Your gourmet peanut butter is not affected by the recent quality issues that were widely publicized in the news – but nobody is buying peanut butter because of it.
- **Screw ups that aren’t related to core competencies** – Deemed such by Wharton operations and information management professor Maurice Schweitzer, these are those “acts of God” – a hurricane floods your warehouse wiping out your inventory and “unexpected catastrophe” – your CFO

clears out your bank account and heads to Columbia. Neither is relative to your core business, but both damage your customer confidence.

The way your company responds to a crisis, especially in the early stages of the event, will determine whether or not your company can be trusted in the future. Are you prepared? Do you have a crisis management plan? A well-managed crisis can not only preserve your reputation and credibility – it can actually enhance them. Don’t panic. Look at it as an opportunity.

Plan for Panic

Can you plan for every possible event? Of course not. But you can be prepared to swing into action when one occurs IF you have a plan. Do it now! When a crisis occurs there is no time to think about a crisis plan. Immediate needs must be met. Do it well, and you will gain friends who will give you the benefit of the doubt and quite possibly help you. Do it badly and the negative perceptions will linger long after the crisis is history. Industry statistics show that a high percentage of companies who do not have a response plan in place will fail to recover from the crisis.

The plan does not have to be a highly-detailed document, but it should provide a flexible action plan that can be easily adjusted to the situation and implemented quickly.

In general, the crisis response plan should include:

- **Who’s in charge?** – Decide who is on the crisis management team by position not name, and who will speak for your organization.
- **Who’s in charge of what?** – List the responsibilities of the members of the team.

- **What happens first?** Create a step by step action plan and checklist for everyone to use.
- **How do we let everyone know what's going on?** Put together a communications plan that includes a list of key media and how you'll get the information to them.
- **When do we pull the trigger?** Decide how and when the plan will be activated.

Get the Word Out

The most important part of your crisis plan is communication. Nothing drives negative rumors, innuendo, etc. faster than a lack of information or an insincere apology. In addition, good news travels at the speed of a click – and bad news even faster. The media will not wait while you meet with your attorney to craft a response. You do not have the luxury of time, which is why you must plan and even have a bare bones crisis release ready – one that includes the basics on your company, who the important people are and how media (and others) can get more information. Here are three steps in that process:

1. Determine who needs to hear your message - your customers, suppliers, employees, business partners, the media. Have the means to reach them in place – e-mail addresses, phone numbers, etc.
2. Determine how you want to reach them – with a statement on your homepage, a posting to your blog or to an industry blog, an e-mail blast, a press conference or media call. You will want to use as many communication channels as possible. Your response needs to be handled in hours, not days.
3. Determine what you want to say. This is the most important aspect of any crisis management response. State what you know and only what you know. Sincerely apologize. Let your audiences know you are gathering information as quickly as possible and describe what you are doing to resolve the situation. If possible explain why the crisis occurred – but do not speculate. You (senior

leadership) are your spokesperson – do not delegate this responsibility. Update your information frequently. Above all, be truthful. You will gain respect and credibility by being transparent and open in your message and response.

Crisis Response Grading

Once the crisis is over, evaluate the effectiveness of your plan. What worked, what didn't? How can you improve? What should you avoid doing in the future? Write it all down and incorporate it into your Crisis Management Plan. Then make sure everyone involved gets a copy of the revised document.

Finally, send out a thank you to your customers, suppliers and yes, the media. This common courtesy can go a long way towards rebuilding or enhancing your brand and reputation. **eBiz**



By Catherine D. Shafer
catherines@ebizinsider.com

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<http://www.internetretailer.com/IRCE2009>

What's the Buzz?



Steve Kaiser, Jamark Laboratories

Selling skin products online is a challenge. Just try searching for "skin cream" or "skin lotion" and see what happens. Millions of products, some brand

names, some crazy claims....how can anyone break through and climb to the top without spending the equivalent of the national debt? Jamarklabs.com has done it by focusing on keywords that create some "buzz" for their products.

Jamarklabs.com is home to Surgeon's Skin Secret, a skin moisturizer. Surgeon's Skin Secret was developed in 1950 by a plastic surgeon that used it to treat post surgical wounds. The product kept the wound from infecting and also helped to reduce scarring. Surgeon's Skin Secret is an all natural beeswax moisturizer, which contains lanolin and mineral oil. The formula softens dry, chapped, irritated skin. Among its many extra benefits include: non-water solubility (won't wash off easily), seals in the body's natural moisture, and it's a long lasting formula.

Founded in 1996 by President Jim Kaiser, Jamark Laboratories has always employed a multi-layer marketing approach that included the Internet, some retail outlets and appearances on QVC. Visit the site and you'll see customer friendly buttons like Specials, Factory Outlet, Articles and Information, VIP offers and a "share with a friend" free sample with purchase. The company knows that 9 out of 10 women who try the product, love it - but how to get customers to the site?

While attending Solid Cactus Boot Camp in May of 2008, Jim's son Steve (National Sales Manager) talked to other store owners who felt that Pay-Per-Click (PPC) marketing was the best way to drive people to their websites. Steve was convinced and began working with Solid Cactus on a PPC plan the next day.

His one requirement - the budget could not exceed \$500 per month. The experts at Solid Cactus accepted the challenge.

None of your bee's wax!

Bee's wax is an unusual ingredient in a skin moisturizer. As part of Solid Cactus' competitor research prior to the start of Jamarklabs.com's PPC marketing, a Google keyword discovery analysis showed that bee's wax was not listed as a keyword for competitor sites which were similar in product pricing. This was a first step in developing a group of keywords that would be tested during phase one of the PPC marketing campaign.

Leigh McGlynn, Sr. Search Engine Marketing Manager at Solid Cactus, launched the PPC marketing in June 2008, well ahead of Jamarklabs.com's busy season. "This is really important," notes Leigh, "you need to test your PPC marketing far enough in advance to be able to make adjustments and be ready for your peak selling season." For Jamarklabs.com, the busy season is September-January so the summer was a perfect time to build ads, test creative word choices, gather data and make adjustments.

Remarkable Results!

When September arrived, the PPC marketing was hitting its stride. Strong GoogleAdWord performers were also being used on Yahoo! and MSN with similar results. The statistics said it all - Conversions increased while the return on advertising spending (ROAS) almost tripled. All of this was accomplished with a small, consistently placed budget that used researched, but perhaps unusual keywords.

GOOGLE AdWords Results

Report Date	Conversion Rate	Cost/Conversion	ROAS
Oct 8 - 08	7.07%	3.89	862.80%
Nov 8 - 08	8.11%	3.78	1048.60%
Dec 8 - 08	10.14%	2.97	1198.20%
Jan 8 - 09	9.58%	3.14	1033.70%
Feb 8 - 09	7.94%	3.67	804.10%

Steve Kaiser was impressed. "Everybody at Solid Cactus is really good at what they do. I try not to bother them. They have the professionalism and expertise, and I've hired them to do the job. So I just stay out of the way." The PPC marketing continues in a maintenance mode during the slower months, focusing on promoting Steve's incentives, promotions, coupons and the addition of new products with the same testing, managing bids and optimizing of ads.

Steve mentioned another good reason to work with Solid Cactus. "It's a one-stop shop," he noted, "I can get all the marketing help I need from them." Jamarklabs.com uses the Solid Cactus Call Center, SEO and recently did a site redesign. Future plans include adding flash video and a zip code locator to the site.

About Jamarklabs.com

Jamarklabs.com, headquartered in Grand Rapids, MI, is owned and operated by the Kaiser family. President and Co-Founder Jim Kaiser has over 30 years in the healthcare and pharmaceutical industries and son Steve is the National Sales Manager. The Surgeon's Skin Secret line of products was launched online in 1996 and has grown to over 40 items/configurations delivered from a 10,000 square foot facility on the South East Side of Grand Rapids. For information, visit <http://www.jamarklabs.com> or call 888.252.6275. **eBiz**



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Tech Corner: a summer fling with a new operating system

What is Windows 7 RC1?

A: Windows 7 Release Candidate 1 is a fully functional version of Microsoft's latest operating system, Windows 7. The Release Candidate is currently available for IT pros and tech enthusiasts alike until at least June 2009.

Microsoft is not limiting the number of product keys, so you have some time to download and install it. The full version of Windows 7 is scheduled to be released later this year, but for those who don't want to wait for the full release, you can download the RC from Microsoft's website now. You don't need to be a systems administrator to use the Release Candidate, but you should be an experienced computer user.

Q: What are the minimum requirements for running Windows 7?

A: The minimum requirements aren't all that hefty, but you should have a system that is capable of handling Windows Vista and be aware that the Release Candidate will become completely unusable on June 1, 2010. Be warned that the release candidate will not run on your machine forever, starting in March the operating system is supposed to shut down every two hours.

Q: Why try Windows 7? I'm just getting used to using Vista...

A: If you are happy with XP or Vista, then by all means stay with it. A Release Candidate install is not for the faint of heart. I am using the Release Candidate because I purchased a system a few years back in preparation for Windows Vista, only to join the disgruntled masses in early adopting an operating system that I really didn't care for. I installed the Windows 7 Beta earlier this year and have been extremely happy with it so far. It isn't the next level of computing and is unlikely to get any Mac users to cross over. However, it is everything that I thought I would get in Vista and didn't. It's stable, it's reliable, and it's pretty easy on the eyes as well. If you're ready for a change and don't want to wait for the full release, give it a try. **eBiz**



By Matt Kresge
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