eBiz Insider

the magazine for e-commerce professionals.

THE PET GUY SHOW

Stand Out from the Rest

—By Scott Sanfilippo

◆ The Substance behind Flash

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◆ Using Social Media Optimization (SMO) to Drive Traffic to your E-Commerce Site

The fall foliage is here, so relax in the shade and read this magazine, or don't – there are plenty of leaves you can rake in… instead of profit.

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CORRECTIONS In the August 2008 eBiz Insider article, "Shipping Perishable Items" the wrong URL was used. The correct URL is: CountryCupboardCookies.com. Additionally, "Toolbox: Keyword Research" was co-authored by Jean Lloyd.

I Really Got Tired of Looking at Her.

By Scott Sanfilippo, Editor in Chief

She was old. Her luster had faded a while ago. She needed a facelift. She would not get taken to the dance.

"She" was our old website which was laid to rest at 5 p.m. on August 25, 2008.

What took her place was a sharp looking, sleek new model complete with all the Web 2.0 gadgets that make the techies swoon.

I'm a bit embarrassed that it took us this long to launch a new site, but as the old saying goes "the shoemaker's children go shoeless!" It was a huge undertaking, as many who go through the redesign process know. It was two years in the making and was under the direction of two or three different leads who all had different visions for what the site should look and feel like.

We had a couple of launch delays, but the day finally came, and with a feeling of excitement in the air, I hit the "publish" button. In a few minutes, our children had shoes and our Corporate Marketing team breathed a huge sigh of relief.

I learned two important lessons during this process of which you should all take note:

Redesigns don't happen overnight.

Anyone who tells you a redesign will take a week or two is lying. I've been in this business for nearly 15 years. I have been on both sides of the sales fence and have never seen a "quality" site launch in less than 8 to 12 weeks. Oh sure, you can slap a template up there and launch a new look in a few hours, but a custom job takes time, and you **WILL** have revisions. Strive for quality! Your website is a direct reflection of how people view your company - it's all about image, so don't sacrifice quality.

There is only one head chef.

Too many cooks in the kitchen do mess up things. Assign one point person to lead your design project and let that person work directly with your designers and programmers. The last thing you want to do is put 10 people in a room to critique mockups for your new site. Believe me, NOBODY is going to agree on any one of them and this is going to result in frustration and extended delays. Trust your point person to make the decisions necessary to get your site launched.

Our Corporate Marketing team also redesigned several of our related sites – most notably our blog (*http://blog. SolidCactus.com*) and our Boot Camp (*http://BootCamp.SolidCactus.com*) sites. Speaking of Boot Camp, it's coming up soon on October 8-10 – so head over and register now! **eBiz**

**Check out the new
Solid Cactus website at
*http://www.SolidCactus.com***

Letters to the Editor...

Dear Editor: We're starting to get busier and busier as the holidays get closer and honestly, are tired of working 20 hour days constantly. We think it's time to hire some help in the warehouse and on the phones, but with the uncertainty of the economy it's a big gamble. We have the two of us, plus three additional full-time staff members. We keep saying that "it's good to be busy… we think?"

—*Sarah and Eric Y., Frakes, KY*

Sarah & Eric: Your issue is one that many merchants face this time of the year and there are three suggestions that might help:

1. Hire someone (or a few someones) on a part-time, temporary basis. You'll need to check your state's labor laws as to the requirements for part-time. Make sure that you're not making any promises like, "well, if things go well maybe you can stay on after…" Ensure that once the holiday rush is over, there are no expectations for continued employment. That doesn't mean you can't change your mind later and keep them.

2. Invite your existing staff to put in some extra time. They already know your products and procedures, so training is minimal. If they're salaried, provide them a 'second job' as an hourly employee to make some extra cash. Reward employees with extra vacation days during slower times.

3. Use third-parties, like Solid Cactus' Call Center to handle your overflow calls. Now's the perfect time to start, before the rush REALLY hits in November. Use Cactus ON Demand to automate your operations, and see last month's article on organizing your warehouse for the holidays.

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

Using Social Media Optimization (SMO)

to Drive Traffic to your E-Commerce Site

No two words are uttered more often in the Search Engine Optimization (SEO) world than Link Building. You have probably heard that a solid link building strategy equals high natural rankings for your site. If you have done your homework you already know: Google and other search engines often reward sites with higher rankings if those sites are linked to by many other well-established and trusted sites. You know that reciprocal linking, commonly called "link exchange", or "link swapping", isn't as effective as it used to be, but can still be a useful tactic in some cases. You have tried contacting site owners on your own and asking (begging!) for a link, to sometimes no availability. Hopefully you've stayed far, far away from those dreaded paid links that Google detests.

How do you succeed at link building? Change your link building thinking, of course! If you're a blogger, you know that you capture links by being entertaining and interacting with others. This tactic is called Social Media Optimization (SMO). It is a facet of Search Engine Optimization—link building's close cousin—and SMO can drive quality links and traffic to your site.

The golden rule of SMO is "engage visitors", not deliver a sales pitch. Although there are likely a few social media sites directly related to your industry, other popular types of social media sites include:

Social Networking Sites - Sites like Facebook.com, Myspace.com, and LinkedIn, where users create profiles about themselves and network with friends. Ning.com, a new networking site, allows you to create your own social networking community.

Content Submission Sites – Think Digg.com, Reddit.com, and Propeller.com. Users create a profile and add content in the form of news articles, blog posts, videos etc. to the site. Other users are able to view this content and vote on it. The more votes your site has, the more likely other sites will notice it and link to it.

Micro-Blogging - Sites such as Squidoo.com, Tumblr.com and Twitter.com allow you to create a blog or mini web page within a larger website. They typically have built-in promotional tools that help get the word out about your micro-blog or mini-site, so visitors to these sites have a better chance of learning about your actual site.

Forums - Forums are sites where users ask questions and other users leave informative responses to their questions. Look for forums related to your industry, as well as related topics on Yahoo! Answers at Answers.Yahoo.com, and remember to join the dialogue with other e-commerce professionals at forums.ebizinsider.com.

Just like traditional link building, SMO has a long list of do's and don'ts, such as:

Do brand yourself as your business. Social media users will know in a heartbeat if you're pretending to be someone you're not. They won't forgive you.

Don't create a profile on a social media site just so you can add your link to it. Remember, SMO is about *connecting* with users who in turn may be naturally propelled to link to your site. You don't have to interact daily, but instead consider social media as a long-term strategy for success.

Do offer value to your visitors and friends. Give them tips, advice, and suggestions. No one likes a pushy car salesman, so stay away from that sales pitch!

Don't love it and leave it—update! Just because you create an informative, great-looking micro-blog or profile doesn't mean you can forget it. It is crucial to post fresh content and update regularly.

Do track your SMO efforts. Data analytics programs like the free and extraordinarily robust Google Analytics allow you to measure the amount of traffic and revenue the social media site is bringing to you. The response may be slow at first, but continue updating your SMO presence and interacting with users, and you'll see a difference over time.

A link between two websites represents a relationship to search engine crawlers. Just like real life, relationships are better when they are as authentic as possible. Social Media Optimization does not replace traditional link building strategies - it's an update that has the potential to create links that drive traffic, conversions—and ranking power–to your site. **eBiz**

By Alicia Magda
aliciam@ebizinsider.com

When is Affiliate Marketing Right (or Wrong) for a Company?

Affiliate Marketing might be the perfect complement, the next "big step" in your current online efforts. I'll go further, saying, "Through Affiliate Marketing you can obtain a higher return on ad spend (ROAS), than through your Pay-Per Click (PPC) campaigns!"

Lets compare.

Everyone knows e-mail marketing will give you more bang for your buck. You're targeting customers who are already familiar with your brand, have purchased from you, and know the quality of product you offer. So, you obviously see a great ROAS with e-mail marketing, in most cases, the best of any marketing effort.

PPC offers exposure to a large audience who may or may not have heard of you or your product. However, you also see lots of "looky-loos" who click on your ad, only to go elsewhere. It can take considerable optimization efforts and money to generate a nice steady return.

Affiliate lets you pay for the sale only when it happens, allowing you to control your spend, therefore maintaining a steady ROAS. If you want to spend 10% - offer

10% commission. It's a great next-step to expand your marketing.

When is an Affiliate Program right for my business?

Every online store develops at a different rate, but if you have already started taking advantage of PPC, E-mail and SEO, it's probably time for you to start an Affiliate Program.

I would rarely recommend starting an Affiliate Program when your store first goes live. You should first have a thorough understanding of your customer base, your top products and worst sellers, how you rank organically for key terms, and your overall marketing spend. Without a few months to a full year of information,

it is not recommended to begin an Affiliate Program.

An Affiliate Program can expose your brand to new, qualified prospects who may not have heard of you. The right affiliates can help you build Brand Awareness, Brand Equity, and new Revenue!

Get all your ducks in a row.

Learn about your customer base first and translate it to your Affiliate Program. By providing these affiliates with intimate knowledge about your average consumer, top products and more, they can market to a targeted base and optimize their efforts quickly. The better they know your product and your site, the better qualified traffic they send, and you will start to see a profit much sooner.

Words of Warning: I've seen it too many times… your PPC isn't working, and you need a last ditch effort to boost sales, so you try an Affiliate Program. Don't do it. You would be beginning this undertaking for all the wrong reasons, with highly unrealistic expectations. Affiliate marketing takes time and effort to build. Building affiliate relationships require time and attention, and you may not see a true return for a few months. You need to solidify your other marketing efforts before reaching out to alternate channels like affiliate - it's just good business.

Note: *A fully matured program can account for 10-20% of your bottom line revenue.*

Speaking of moolah…

Money is another important consideration when launching an Affiliate Program.

If you don't have the right funds readily available, you will be left struggling as the program builds. You need to have the startup capital available to enter an affiliate network like Commission Junction, purchase tracking software, or simply to pay commissions.

Most networks will require an initial setup fee, and a whole bunch of important "optional" add-ons. If you go the network route, make sure you have enough capital available for this, and any escrow account deposits that are required.

When it's time to pay affiliates, if you don't have the cash on hand, it's a bad situation for you, and your affiliates. If you sold $10k this month through your Affiliate Program, owe $1,500 in commissions and already have that $10k spent, you won't be able to pay your affiliates in a timely manner and they may stop promoting you.

By starting off with realistic expectations, the right information, the proper amount of capital, and a plan, you can begin building an outstanding Affiliate Program. **eBiz**

By Michelle Pushefski

michellep @ebizinsider.com

The Substance Behind *f*lash

Best Buy, JCPenney, Toys 'R' Us. These are among many of the top e-commerce stores which have begun to utilize Adobe Flash to attract customers to their sales and products. As a competitor to big name stores, you are (yeah, we're not giving you a choice here) interested in Flash but have several unanswered questions. What do you do? Keep reading!

What IS Flash?

According to Wikipedia, Adobe Flash "is a set of multimedia software developed and distributed by Adobe Systems. Since its introduction in 1996, Flash has become a popular method for adding animation and interactivity to web pages; Flash is commonly used to create animation, advertisements, and various web page components, to integrate video into web pages, and more recently, to develop rich Internet applications."

How can Flash enhance the customer's experience?

Flash can certainly enrich your customer's shopping experience in a variety of ways. You can display rotating featured items or add interactivity with real-time item customization. Flash can enhance a visitor's experience or provide customization control – reaping huge benefits.

What purpose would Flash fulfill?

Integrate Flash into your website strategy, not as an afterthought. A Flash element on your site can definitely increase conversions. You can utilize Flash to bring attention to special promotions or featured items. Flash can also make your pages dynamic by rotating special deals or products, giving customers another reason to return to your site and another opportunity for you to drive them to the item page.

Where should you place Flash on your site?

Since most Flash integrations are animated and eye-catching, you will want them prominently displayed in the middle of the homepage or in the header, so as not to disrupt the eye's natural flow. One note of caution: if your website is heavy on text and information, adding Flash may confuse and distract your customers.

Flash, Ajax, other solutions?

Work with your developer to research whether or not Flash might be better managed by another technology. Sometimes a JavaScript and/or AJAX solution will be better suited for the functionality you need. There is also a chance PHP and a database or XML might be a better solution. Don't get caught up in the latest and greatest Flash feature without doing some research into other solutions.

Planning for Flash Integration

If you are confident that Flash would improve your website, start planning your expectations and try not to leave out any of the details. Find examples of features you would like to see incorporated into your site. When putting together a feature with your developer, make the effort to have others test it. Make sure you get a good mix of people aren't familiar with the feature. Get them to evaluate the functionality.

For example, some testers may see the feature loaded in their browser but don't understand the next steps. You will need to use this feedback in fine tuning the feature's interactivity.

Other important considerations

Keep in mind that some users block interactive content, such as JavaScript and Flash, for security reasons. If you do use Flash on your website, make sure everything looks and functions properly without Flash in case users do block it.

Flash also has some SEO weaknesses. The Flash feature you incorporate into your site will not be completely indexed by most search engines. However, many of the larger search engines such as Google and Yahoo! continue to work on extracting the information from the Flash movie and indexing it. With this in mind, do not use Flash for main navigation or displaying critical information on your website.

Speak with experts to help make the best decision for you, your customers, and ultimately, your e-business.

Writers' Top Picks of Flash Examples:

The Weekender (*www.theweekender.com*) *– example of Flash rotating dynamic content*

Spytown (*www.spytown.com*) and All The Whey (*www.allthewhey.com*) *– more examples of Flash rotating dynamic products*

All The Whey uses Flash rotating dynamic products to spotlight their featured items.

BTI Tactical (*www.btitactical.com*) *– example of Flash rotating brand names in the header*

The big players in e-commerce are using Flash, which means you have to take a very close look at this feature. Flash *will* help your business. Your job is to figure out how to make it happen. Good luck! **eBiz**

By Greg Paone & Sarah Johnson

greg.paone@ebizinsider.com

TOOLS TO IMPROVE YOUR BUSINESS

ECMTA

E-COMMERCE MERCHANTS
TRADE ASSOCIATION

Cresta Pillsbury, Executive Vice President for Business Development for ECMTA

ECMTA

How can small businesses find great rates on healthcare? On shipping? On other ancillary services? Trade associations have long been the answer to bringing those in a particular trade or industry together to advance the industry, as well as to pool resources for shared benefits among members.

In 2005, online merchants were for the first time able to join a trade association geared toward e-commerce with the formation of the E-Commerce Merchants Trade Association, or ECMTA.

According to ECMTA.org, the organization was formed when a small group of online merchants got together to share ideas on improving their business. The group quickly acknowledged that learning how to optimize

every aspect of a business was virtually impossible for a small business, so they decided to rely upon each others' expertise. ECMTA proudly claims to be the only trade association dedicated to educating small to medium-sized online merchants on how to grow their businesses for very low monthly membership fees.

Cresta Pillsbury, Executive Vice President for Business Development for ECMTA, says since 2005, the association has evolved to include more and more benefits.

"Over the past year the organization has formalized its Partnership program, which is like a Consumer Reports for Internet vendors," she said. "The organization has worked hard to compile a comprehensive list

of the industry leaders and negotiate special offers and pricing for our members so they get the best service and rates available."

Special pricing is key for independent merchants. ECMTA is able to use its muscle to negotiate rates for services such as shipping, payment processing and other pertinent e-commerce necessities.

"The benefits of joining E-Commerce Merchants are numerous and we're adding more regularly," said Pillsbury. "I think the most popular include our merchant processing deal with Pivotal Payments and our BoldChat deal is also very popular. We recently introduced a special Control Scan offer for website security about which we are very excited. Plus, since we've already negotiated the best rates with our benefits providers, our members receive the most competitive pricing available."

Aside from special pricing, ECMTA provides educational materials and events for its members. Pillsbury says that since 2005, the association has held over a dozen events in cities around the country and even Australia.

"Our events are a way for merchants to interact with the people they know 'virtually' in an intimate and professional setting," she said. "Our members want to learn about improving their businesses all year-round, not just when they attend a conference. That is why we host an interactive community website that includes a very active chat board. We also send newsletters and host webinars and conference calls on a regular basis."

So, who is a good candidate to benefit from ECMTA? According to Pillsbury, everyone in e-commerce should take a look.

"Most of our members are busy executives, many are do-it-all entrepreneurs and all of them are interested in being more efficient with their time," she says. "E-Commerce Merchants helps them locate the best tools for optimizing their businesses. Anyone who is using the Internet to promote a business or to sell a product will benefit from joining E-Commerce Merchants."

"Our goal is for every small business to enjoy the benefits of membership in E-Commerce Merchants. We plan to

continue providing valuable services and benefits to any merchant interested in improving e-commerce," she added.

While it's true that there is strength in numbers, it is important to be part of the right numbers to truly benefit. If you're an e-commerce operator, chances are you need help somewhere. The ECMTA may have the answers you seek. **eBiz**

By Donna Talarico

donnat@ebizinsider.com

Stand Out from the Rest

> " *When the going gets tough, the tough get creative.* "

There is no better time than the present to embrace that phrase and live by it. Let's face it, the economy is taking its toll on everyone right now and the ones who creatively market their products and services will be the ones to come out on top.

So what is an online merchant to do? Make sure that you (and your e-business) are seen as experts in the field and position yourself as a credible source of information and products!

Blog, Blog, Blog!

Blogs have come a long way in the past year. What used to be second and third tier media have now made it into the mainstream and should be part of every e-business plan. If you're selling trains, you should be writing about the new special edition from Lionel or some new must-have accessories for your platform. Blogs get indexed very well in the search engines, so use keywords in your paragraphs that people will be searching for and that wil give links back to your store when mentioning the specific product that you sell.

Market to existing customers.

Every customer who places an order on your site can be a repeat customer. If you're not doing anything to bring that person back, you're leaving money on the table. E-mail marketing is one of the best ways to market to your existing customers. For a reasonable investment, you're keeping them informed and up-to-date on new products, special offers and what's going on in your store. On average, you should be touching your customer with an e-mail campaign two times per month. But be compelling! E-mailing them to say "hello" doesn't cut it. E-mailing them a coupon for 15% off their next order is a win. E-mail Marketing to current customers has higher returns than any other online marketing method.

Spread the virus.

Viral marketing is hotter than ever and is perhaps the most creative thing you can do to spread the word about your company. Have a funny,

"Scott, The Pet Guy" was recently approached by The Luzerne Foundation, a local non-profit agency, to "star" in a commercial promoting a benefit Texas Hold-Em tournament.

captivating flash application created that's funny enough that it's going to be forwarded to everyone in your customer's address book. Create a video and put it on YouTube that features your products being used in an entertaining way that will get people watching and sharing. Create pages for your business on MySpace and Facebook and keep them updated. These are especially effective when your target market is the under 30 crowd. Become an expert on LinkedIn using their 'Answers' and generate traffic to your site through effective tell-a-friend campaigns.

There's no such thing as a free… oh wait, yes there is!

When we sold our pet supply division, we wanted to stay e-commerce owners, so we opened a lawn and garden site (neeps.com). To start us off, the only form of advertising we used was listing our products in the comparison shopping engines (CSEs). We used FeedPerfect to manage the items and watch profitability. We were astonished with the sales we generated without any other form of advertising. More than a year later, the majority of our ad spend is still directed to the CSEs. Feed Perfect is available with a special 45-day free trial, just use the promo code "ebizsept" at FeedPerfect.com. Invest a bit of time into setting it up and give it a try. You've got a free ride for 45 days, so take advantage of the revenue opportunity!

Market yourself.

You know your products better than anyone. Remember that you are the expert in your field, so flaunt it a bit! Here is an example of how this can pay off. When we

still operated our pet supply businesses, we weren't doing any business locally. We had a 20,000 square foot warehouse and a $5 million dollar inventory, but no local sales. Looking to capture some of the local business, I teamed up with our local talk-radio station and bought two hours of time on a Saturday afternoon. I did a call-in talk show about pets, sponsored by none other than our company! You might not have the time or resources to do the same, but you *could* create "expert" videos using a webcam and YouTube!

"The Pet Guy" Show ran for five years on two different stations, generated a buzz in the community, boosted our local sales and gave me more recognition as "The Pet Guy" than the owner of a high-tech company in coal-town.

I've been off the air for three years now, but my reputation still carries. I was recently approached by The Luzerne Foundation, a local non-profit agency, to "star" in a commercial promoting a benefit Texas Hold-Em tournament they're having, but not as Scott from Solid Cactus - as Scott, The Pet Guy. The video features me and five dogs sitting around playing poker. (Check out the video on our blog, *http://blog.solidcactus.com*.) It's viral, It's on YouTube, I blogged about it, I was the expert and it's creative marketing. Who can ask for anything more? **eBiz**

By Scott Sanfilippo
scotts@ebizinsider.com
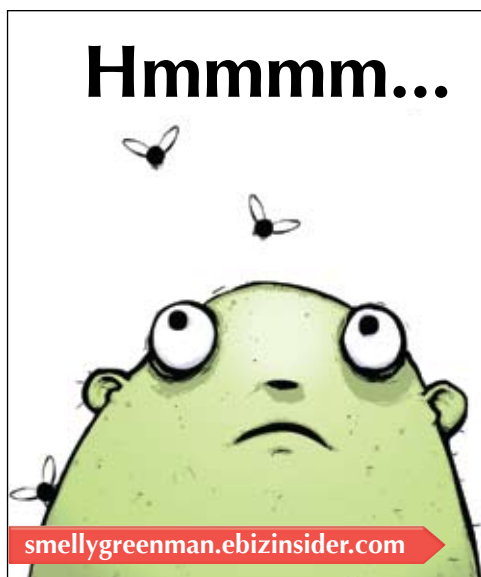
Catalogs Can Complement an E-Commerce Site

As e-commerce businesses begin to grow, a dilemma some may face is the decision of whether a catalog is an appropriate multichannel tool.

Latienda.com, which sells a variety of items not generally available outside of Spain, was faced with just such a predicament six years ago. And interestingly enough, Latienda's decision to eventually produce a catalog was not an internal decision — it came about due to customer demand.

Tim Harris, co-owner of Latienda.com, said while the focus was always on the website, the company could simply no longer ignore the repeated requests for a catalog.

Harris said initially Latienda.com started with a very basic catalog they would design and print themselves, on copier paper, which was then sent to several hundred customers. Those first catalogs, according to Harris, were mainly a one-color pricelist without photos or item descriptions.

Eventually, Latienda.com decided it could do better. "The customers demanded it and then we finally decided after several years, 'Well, look. If we're going do this, let's do it right,'" Harris said. "Then as soon as we did it right, we saw an immediate response, and since then it's just been the more resources that we've devoted to the catalog, the better the return has become."

Today, Latienda.com distributes a 24-page, full size, four-color catalog four times throughout the year. Annually, the company sends out 800,000 catalogs, compared to 200,000 just three years ago.

Importantly, Harris said the catalogs have in no way reduced the company's online traffic. "We find them to be extremely effective at driving business to the Internet," Harris said. "I'd say there was fear initially because we used to be almost 100 percent online in terms of our orders. We've got 700 items on the website, and in our catalog we feature only about 100, and the fear was that all of a sudden we might be packed into sort of a typical mail order company that is relying on phones. But it didn't really happen. People continue to order online and what we know, mostly from anecdotal accounts, is people get the catalog and it reminds them of whom we are. They'll sit down and circle an item and pass it around the family, and then they go online and order. It's great. I think it's a better browsing experience than most people have online."

Harris did, however, say a company should be generating a certain amount of revenue before considering the addition of a catalog. "I think that the cost of designing, printing and mailing a catalog can quickly run into tens, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars, even for the small cataloger. Our feeling was that we had to be a certain size, so that if it fails, it wasn't going to ruin the business. My sense is to do a four-color, full size catalog, you would need to have $1 million in sales to make it worth it."

What Does A Catalog Cost?

We asked American Web, a leading catalog printer, what it costs to print and mail a catalog. We asked for these prices assuming 10,000 copies of a 24-page catalog at a standard size of roughly 8" x 11". We also asked American Web to assume standard binding and standard paper stock. Its estimate:

Design - Cost varies by designer

Printing - $3,100

Mail Preparation - $400

Postage - (42¢ each) - $4,200

Total Estimate - $7,666 + Design
—*PeC Staff*

XtremeDiesel.com, which started in 2002, is an e-commerce business specializing in Dodge Cummins, Ford Powerstroke and Chevy/GMC diesel performance parts. It grosses more than $9 million annually, and is currently in the process of designing its own catalog to distribute.

Similar to Latienda.com, XtremeDiesel.com's reasons for starting a catalog developed from customer demand, as well as its unique consumer base.

"What started happening is we started to get quite a few phone calls from guys who have never seen our website or didn't really know much about us, but heard about us from a friend, and our salesmen would spend quite a bit of time on the phone explaining to them all these different products," said Dan Stewart, a partner with Xtreme Diesel Performance. "So, just from word of mouth we were getting a lot of requests for a catalog, more than I ever thought we would get. So, really, it was kind of the demand of our customers. That was one of the main things. One of the other things was credibility — building trust and loyalty, and definitely brand recognition goes along with that. But also we're really trying to be a multichannel company and not just, 'Oh, they're a bunch of Internet guys,' or fly-by-night-operation, working out of their house. And even aside from the customer ordering out of our catalog, it's really a way of showing, 'Hey, we're for real. We're investing in this industry and we're out there.'"

As for distributing its catalog, XtremeDiesel.com already has several channels in mind, starting with a link that allows potential customers to request a catalog. "We kind of feel like those people who spent the time to click that link, fill out their address, and submit it are going to be the most valuable to us," Stewart said. "Next, we'll probably hand them out at trade shows, and if that goes well, we might take the approach of sending them out to our entire customer base and, also, include them with each order, but that would probably be last just because it's such a lengthy list and it's quite costly."

Stewart said XtremeDiesel.com plans to have its catalog finished in September, and it will be mailed prior to the holiday season. The finished product will feature 12 pages, and all layout and design is taking place inhouse. Stewart said that decision came down to the simple fact that it allows the company to change images on-site. However, he also noted a downside, which includes both an increased workload for the staff, which is handling both the marketing and advertising aspects of the catalog, and knowing when and where to stop.

"One of the major things with this that we found is in the automotive industry, there's always new vehicles coming out so you almost have to say to yourself, 'Okay, right now I have to stop,' because all we keep saying is, 'Oh, the '09s are coming out,'" Stewart said. "So, now we'll start adding the 2009 products in it. Now, we're altering the pages and as we add that, another manufacturer will come out with something and all you end up doing is just you keep adding to it and never actually releasing it. So, you kind of have to just say, 'All right. That's it.'" **eBiz**

Send in the Clones

Diversify by Targeting Niche Markets and Expand your Sales!

So you've created a great brand, you have strong products and you're ready to crush the competition! Wait – maybe you don't want to crush the competition so much as profit from *being* the competition. Wouldn't you rather expand your reach in the market and profit from opening multiple stores while competing with yourself?

Best of all, you can now target niche markets, increase your sales and create competition in the market without spending a ton of money. You can do all of this without adding too much administrative time (except maybe filling more orders…).

It's time to *Send in the Clones!* We're not talking about a science fiction plot here. These are store clones – the inexpensive way to expand your business and create a niche in the market by copying your current Yahoo! Store. By cloning your store, you can modify the design of your store to give the cloned store its own look and feel. This is a great way to create multiple brands while cornering your market.

Expanding your business to include a clone can have many benefits including:

- **Savings**
  - In most cases the cost to make an exact copy of your site can be as little as **a third of the cost** as your original store development investment.

- Most features clone over into your secondary stores so you don't need to purchase and reinstall vital features.
- Redesigning the clone is not always required. A new header, color scheme or other stylistic changes make the cost and burden of reprogramming a whole new site unnecessary.

- **Product Management**
  - You can use the product stock of one site and sell it on your cloned site. This is the same as opening two brick-and-mortar stores and sharing the stock.

- **Own the Market Niche**
  - Consumers like to comparison shop. It's good to have choices in the market but even better if you are "competing" with yourself. This can be a profitable way of owning the market niche while giving your customers choices.

A Clone Success Story

DreamlandJewelry.com sells high-end jewelry for men and women and the brand

properly reflects the value of the diverse products. However, the management team at DreamlandJewelry.com quickly realized it could increase revenue by further segmenting some of the niche products.

DreamlandJewelry.com cloned the store into two niche sites to create more reach in the market. The first clone, **BadAssJewelry.com** targets a very defined niche of bikers, Goth and tattoo enthusiasts. The second, **MensJewelryClub.com**, targets jewelry specifically for men.

DreamlandJewelry.com now has an opportunity to market its products to multiple audiences and can tap that same inventory for all sales.

This is only one example of how having multiple clones has allowed a company to diversify its market interest without losing focus on the flagship store. Imagine what you could be doing to expand your business.

Below are a few of many options you may consider when cloning your store:

1. Cloning without re-branding. There are no design variations from your original store. These types of clones are great for password protecting in that you now have a wholesale site where you can give out the username and password for "wholesale only" clients.

2. Clone you store with minor design changes that will allow you to create subtle differences from your flagship site.

3. Clone your site using more significant changes to the shell and body of your site. This allows you more freedom to re-brand your products with the greatest contrast from your flagship site.

Whether you plan to compete with yourself, corner the market or branch into other products and services, cloning your store will give you an advantage. You can increase your share in the market, easily implement your current inventory into multiple stores and save money on store development. So, what are you waiting for? SEND IN THE CLONES!!! **eBiz**

By Joseph Domkowski & Gregory Davis

joseph.domkowski@ebizinsider.com
gregory.davis@ebizinsider.com

Fewer people leave, more of them stay at

"I've been with Solid Cactus before they were Solid Cactus! Whenever they come out with a new feature, you can be pretty sure I'll be adding it."

—Tony Sakakeeny, SakWorldPaintball.com

Tony Sakakeeny

SakWorldPaintball.com, as its name implies is, the place to go for all things paintball. Whether it's the guns themselves, or vests, tanks, pants, jerseys and everything else you could possibly want to wage paint war. The company was born in the Boston area and the primary customers are men between 13 and 30 with an average order totaling around $150. SakWorldPaintball.com has 1,000 products and has been in business since 1998. They're real e-commerce pioneers. The company has actually been around since before Solid Cactus formed. "I knew one of the early managers before he joined the company and I knew one of the Solid Cactus founders," Tony recalls. "I've been with them since the beginning and vice versa. Solid Cactus has always done my site designs and redesigns."

SakWorldPaintball.com has been an early subscriber to Solid Cactus products and new features. "I was a Beta tester for the company for years," Tony recalls. "I know it's critical to success in this medium that you stay up with every improvement. There is a constant evolution in e-commerce and I think it's good business to stay as informed as possible." A year ago Tony signed up for Checkout Manager Optimization. He was battling a problem common to e-commerce operators, shopping cart abandonment.

For stores on the Yahoo! Small Business platform, the checkout process includes customers viewing the shopping cart and checkout through a secondary server that does not integrate the design of the original store. According to Jupiter Research, 17% of online power-shoppers abandon cart because the checkout is too long and confusing. Solid Cactus simplified the aesthetics with Checkout Manager Optimization and added "step" graphics so the shopper was aware of their progress to completion. They redesigned the header graphic to focus on customer service and added the "free shipping countdown" text to encourage upsells. Solid Cactus also removed the navigation from the shopping cart to keep the click stream more conversion focused.

A different but related problem is the team resistance by many customers to logging in and leaving pertinent information with a shopping site. According to Jupiter Research, 24% of customers abandoned cart if they were forced to register for a site login. SakWorldPaintball.com added the customer login, but Solid Cactus made sure shoppers were aware this was an optional step. They also added an 800 number.

Tony noticed the difference immediately. "We started getting a lot more phone calls," he says. "People called with questions. Then we found they'd either complete the checkout online or finish the order by phone."

In fact, Solid Cactus was able to lessen the rates of shopping cart abandonment for SakWorldPaintball.com. The new checkout design decreased abandonment by 8.4% to 89.9%. The original initial cart page saw an 86% loss of customers, which decreased to 65% post-optimization. Of those who made it to the shipping/billing page, abandonment rates went from 87.3% pre-optimization to 70.9% post-optimization.

SakWorldPaintball.com recently launched it's redesigned site with all the bells and whistles.

The bottom line is that when fewer people leave, more of them stay and more of them ultimately buy. In the end, the enhancements led to an increase in average order size and revenue by 12%.

Tony Sakakeeny says he's happy with the increases in conversions, but he's been in e-commerce a long time and doesn't take anything for granted. "I'm just completing my latest redesign," he says. "In this industry it's easy to get complacent and put things off. Whether it's a new feature or a new look, we have to keep up. People like variety and they like change in their shopping experience. If we don't give it to them they'll shop on sites that will." **eBiz**

By Kevin Lynn
kevinl @ebizinsider.com

TOOLBOX: Google Webmaster Tools

Robots, Spiders and Crawlers... Oh My! Master Your Site with Google Tools

Every day, webmasters and e-commerce entrepreneurs are becoming increasingly savvy about the authority and visibility they have on the Web. Even with all that power, there are still plenty of factors beyond your control, like when search engines crawl your site or what pages the search engines choose to index. There's nothing that a webmaster can do about that, right?

Wrong!

While search engines are never going to give marketers or business owners the secrets of their search algorithms, free services like Google Webmaster Tools can give users a competitive edge. Webmaster Tools allows its users to observe diagnostic data about their website, derived from the crawls performed by Google's search engine robot – the Googlebot.

I know, I know. Crawling robots? It can sound a bit scary, but it's way less scary than *The Matrix*.

Search engines log web pages in their index by sending out automated agents to those pages to parse the information there, which is why they're called robots. They've also been nicknamed crawlers and, because they're traveling around on 'the Web', spiders. The three terms are interchangeable.

Just like a search engine robot is called a crawler, what it does is called crawling. A spider's visit to a website is referred to as a crawl in Internet jargon.

Googlebot is the software that Google uses to create an index of retrievable websites that it uses to answer users' search queries.

Not just a single application, Googlebot is the collective terminology for two distinct crawlers. The first is Deepbot, and its goal is drilling down as deeply as it can into a site's architecture and indexing as many pages as possible, a process that it undertakes on a monthly basis. The second 'bot is called Freshbot, and it's the robot responsible for locating recent, "fresh" content on the Web. It visits sites that change frequently, like blogs, and the frequency of its visits is based upon how often those sites update.

How do these Googlebots get around? Links. These spiders follow every link on every page that they index (with some meaningful exceptions that I'll talk about in just a few issues' time) and catalog the text and links that appear on each page, factoring them into its algorithm when it comes time to choose a site for retrieval in a search engine results page.

Google Webmaster Tools, then, lets you look at the information the Googlebot gleans from your site, which you can use to improve future crawls. For example, Webmaster Tools can help you:

- Create an .xml Site Map
- Identify crawl errors
- Find nonexistent (404) or otherwise unreachable pages
- Discover URLs that are restricted by your site's robots.txt
- View errors in your site's meta tags
- Uncover Non-indexable content
- View the anchor text of links to your site
- Measure and set Googlebot's crawl activity on your site
- Find all the pages on your site indexed by Google
- Learn the top search queries driving traffic to your site

Those are all good things for increasing your online visibility.

Having a comprehensive and up-to-date Site Map, for example, is a great way to ensure that all the pages you want the world to see can be indexed. Learning about dead ends and errors in the Googlebot's spidering path will increase the amount of information. Analyzing your anchor text will let you know what keywords Google associates with your site. Learning more about how traffic arrives at your site can give you some insight into how to lower your bounce rate.

I can hear you asking yourself, "When is using Google Webmaster Tools going to get me to number one in the organic results pages?" By itself, it won't. There's still no way to game search engines. The benefit of Webmaster Tools is that it can teach you what isn't working in your site architecture, give some guidance on how search engines categorize your website and help you tailor the information visible to the search engine robots. Taken in aggregate, this can all be used to improve your site's navigation and user experience, which can lead to an improvement in your organic rankings and more importantly, conversions. **eBiz**

By Jeff Stolarcyk

jeff.stolarcyk@ebizinsider.com

Broaden Your Advertising Horizons with
Geo-Targeting

Most online store owners are keenly aware of the source of their business. Not only in terms of venues (paid traffic, organic search results, e-mail marketing, etc), but also which geographic regions provide revenues. Northern states may snap up winter products much faster than Florida and Texas, while coastal shoppers might be more likely to buy beach gear than those in the middle of the country. If you ship internationally, you may find that a good percentage of your sales are coming from different countries and even different continents. In fact, if you're using Pay-Per-Click advertising to market your business, you can leverage this information right inside your own accounts.

Geo-targeting is a powerful way to market directly to your best customers as well as to reach out and test new audiences. If a product performs below par in paid search, but you know it's one of your top movers, geo-targeting may be a way to make it profitable. If your organic rankings in international search engines are low, geo-targeting your PPC ads can increase your exposure in key countries.

Google, Yahoo! & MSN all offer some form of geo-targeting. While the particulars for each engine may differ, the best practices for setting up geo-targeted Pay-Per-Click ads remain the same. First, find out what regions you should be targeting. If you have geographic information available inside your store itself, you can start looking for trends there.

There are a variety of online tools available that can provide further insight into international search and buying patterns. Google Trends (*trends.google.com*) explores the interest level in search terms around the world. Plug in some of your core keywords and you'll see the top countries and cities that are searching those keywords.

You can obtain more personalized results by installing an analytics tool on your

website. Google Analytics is free, which makes it a great fit for many e-commerce store owners. Not only will you get the geographic specific data you need for your PPC ads, but you'll gain a wealth of information to help you make informed decisions about your business.

Once you're armed with the proper data, there are a couple of ways to set up your geo-targeted campaign, depending on your needs. First, you can have it target regions within your current market. Take high-end products that don't convert well and directly target affluent neighborhoods. Create special promotions and target those ads directly to your top markets. Just be sure to create a separate campaign so you can clearly monitor the targeted ads.

Once you get your feet wet, expand your ads to include other countries. A good first test is to target Canada, if you aren't already. English speaking countries are a safe bet for this first round of testing. Don't be surprised to find that your top keywords aren't driving as many sales internationally. Go back to your tools and look for keywords that have already driven sales and expand from there. Try creating country specific ad text that lets searchers know you ship internationally. In addition, check to see if the keywords you've chosen translate the same in different countries. Even within the English language, different cultures call the same products different names (e.g. a diaper in America is called a "nappy" in England). If you're extra daring, try translating ads & landing pages into different languages and add those to your geo-targeting arsenal.

Remember to test, test, and test some more! Like any well developed Pay-Per-Click campaign, it takes time to gather data and make informed decisions. Geo-targeting isn't an option for every advertiser, but if you have the time and budget to try it, you might just discover an entirely new venue for reaching potential customers. **eBiz**

By Jean Lloyd
jeanl@ebizinsider.com

Tech Corner:
Choosing the Best Web Hosting Provider

So, Solid Cactus redesigned your website and now you're raking in the cash… and the traffic. You're also considering adding some new media to your website… like Flash, Videos, High-Res Images, PDF downloads. It's time to look at hosting options. Where do you begin?

There are three main types of hosting that you'll want to consider: Shared, Dedicated and Virtual-Dedicated.

Shared Hosting – your files are hosted on a server that also is used by other customers. You share the resources which that server provides. The cost of each server is shared with those who cohabitate on it, therefore making the cost-per-seat the lowest of the three types – but the speed of the server can be affected if another tenant is hogging resources or bandwidth. Shared or Grid hosting costs anywhere from $5 to $25 per month. For e-commerce users on the Yahoo! Merchant Solutions platform, shared hosting is included.

Dedicated Hosting – your files are hosted on a server that is all yours. You get all the resources, all the bandwidth and you can customize settings down to the operating system level. You often have full access to the server as an "administrator" and can often resell or partition some of your bandwidth for someone else. This is a practice known as reselling shared space on a dedicated server. With this solution, you get all the benefits, but also pay all the cost, starting around $125 per month.

Virtual-Dedicated Hosting – your files are placed on a shared server, giving you all the benefits (including cost savings) of a shared server, but the resources are provisioned just for you. You are guaranteed a certain amount of system resources and bandwidth. This works as an in-between option if you've outgrown shared hosting and are not ready for a dedicated solution.

So, now that you've determined which type of server you need… how do you narrow down the hundreds of providers?

Longevity – How long has the company been around? Web hosting companies come and go every day. Check the host's "About Us" page and make sure they've been around at least 3 or 4 years. They also should have specifications for their datacenter. Do they use rack-mounted, high-quality, name-brand servers and are they multi-honed (having multiple Internet connections)?

Contract Terms – If you're not happy after a month or two, can you get out of it, or are you locked in for a year or longer? SingleHop, the Chicago-based dedicated server provider that hosts eBizInsider.com goes a step further. The first month of hosting is offered at $1. If you're not happy, you cancel. If you are, you'll start getting bills after 30 days.

Service – What happens during the peak shopping times and your server is lagging or goes down? Who ya gonna call? "ServerBusters?" No such luck. Check out service companies before buying. Do they have phone numbers or are they just using ticketing systems? Do they outsource their support to another country? Do your own test. Call the number and find out how long you sit on hold before someone answers. If you start to get impatient, imagine how you would feel if something went awry and you couldn't get in touch. SingleHop co-founder Dan Ushman refuses to outsource support. "Everything is done right here in Chicago. The technician you speak with when you call support is the person who will be working on your server, not a drone in another country at a call center. Your dedicated account manager gets a report of any issues and makes sure you're happy."

Customer Reviews – Finally, there are so many hosting providers to choose from, competition is fierce. Hosting review sites like www.WebHostingTalk.com can assist in your decision.

If you've spent the time, money and effort to make your site look great for your customers, make sure to finish the job. Make sure your hosting choice matches your site and traffic needs.

Got a tech question or topic suggestion? Ask at the Tech Corner Forum at *http://forum.ebizinsider.com*. **eBiz**

By John Dawe
johnd@ebizinsider.com

BOOT CAMP @ HQ 2008

the conference for e-commerce professionals

Solid Cactus Boot Camps are multi-day events designed to give the e-commerce store owner the opportunity to attend multiple training sessions that are focused on building business and making the most of your e-commerce site. Seminars throughout the event are focused on ways to grow and improve your business, plus you'll have the opportunity to share ideas and thoughts with your peers and the experts on hand.

In addition to our educational seminars, we've arranged for exciting after-hours activities to make the most of your Boot Camp experience. Now drop and give me twenty. Just kidding.

"The industry is growing so fast and changing so rapidly I think it is vital to attend 'Boot Camp'... to be on top of what is changing on the Internet and at least to be aware."

— *Robert Cuozzo, HouseOfNutrition.com*

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