eBiz Insider

the magazine for e-commerce professionals.

CASH IN ON PPC
How to Improve ROI on Your Campaigns

Steps to leverage pay-per-click marketing efforts. —*By Farukh Shroff*

ALSO INSIDE:

◆ How to Get Free PR for Your Business

◆ Communicate, Don't Decorate

◆ Holiday Prep Checklist

◆ Live Help - the Virtual CSR

Read this magazine and take advantage of the longer days for more profits. Or skip it... Is it dark yet?

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COMING NEXT MONTH

- *Successful Keyword Generation:*
  Selecting the right keywords to capture buyer's clicks.

- *PayPal Express Checkout:*
  Provide your customers with a fast, streamlined checkout process.

- *Outsourcing Customer Service:*
  How to do it without alienating your customer.

- *Plus, Tech Corner, Letters to the Editor, and more!*

SOLIDCACTUS®
your partner in e-commerce success

When the time is right, you'll know.

*By Scott Sanfilippo,
Editor in Chief*

I learned the meaning of that phrase when I faced selling a company that was part of my life for 13 years. The story goes like this. In 1994, Joe Palko and I bought a ferret. This furry little creature needed all the comforts of home but pet stores were less than accommodating. (See why up-sells are important!) Knowing other people were having a hard time finding a quality cage or comfortable hammock, we set out on a mission to make a few extra bucks by hawking ferret supplies on a very new medium called the Internet. TheFerretStore.com was born. Selling on line in 1994 was a challenge, but we carved out a nice little niche in the pet industry over the next 13 years.

In 2001, we started a second company called Solid Cactus to give other budding entrepreneurs great looking and functional websites. The demand was greater than we

could have ever imagined and the company began to mushroom. Joe stepped away from TheFerretStore.com, while I stayed behind selling ferret hats and litter pans.

TheFerretStore.com was stable, growth was manageable and we had a strong foothold in the marketplace because of our iron-clad reputation among pet owners. Finally, I made the leap to Solid Cactus in mid-2005 leaving TheFerretStore.com in the hands of an established management team.

As Solid Cactus continued to grow the question continued to surface, "should we sell the pet company so we can concentrate more on Cactus?" We saw margins throughout the pet industry beginning to shrink, while the competition had deeper and deeper pockets. We saw a change in the wind.

We felt it. The time was right.

We'd built the company right and treated our customers right, so we wanted to sell right. We went with the largest pet supply mail-order catalog company in the country, Drs. Foster & Smith from Rhinelander, Wisconsin. The entire transaction was complete in 30 days. It was 13 years of memories which included a final important lesson. Go with your gut. When it tells you to move on, listen. **eBiz**

How to Get Free PR for Your Business

"The first rule of advertising is— if you can afford to advertise, you don't need to."

That eternal wisdom is at the heart of every small business owner's dilemma. Beyond the irony is a message. Advertising is an investment, not an expense. The problem is, no matter where you try to put advertising budgets on your balance sheet, you may not have the money to spend. There is also the matter of ad clutter. The average American sees 3,000 ads every single day. Just because you spend the money to advertise doesn't mean your message will get through.

Companies large and small are turning more attention to public relations. A good PR campaign will be reported—as news. Your company will receive publicity in the form of news stories. More than that, you'll be believed! Intelligent PR campaigns are memorable, enhance a company's image and best of all, if you do it yourself, it can be free! Beware, though. Major companies hire PR firms and pay huge fees for this "free" publicity and news coverage. There are no guarantees. As the PR pros say, "You pay for advertising. You pray for PR."

The Basics

Public Relations are how you manage your firm's attention. If you can get people to notice your business and remember you in a positive way, you will be successful. It works like this. When you're watching the news, you watch the stories. When the commercials come on, you go to the john or talk on the phone or wrestle the cat. Good PR lets you become the story and is much more effective than advertising because people are actually paying attention.

Sell Yourself

Every company has some unique and therefore newsworthy quality. Or, think of an event, stunt or humanitarian promotion that portrays your firm in a positive light. The newsworthiness of the issue is the key to news people, so star the issue and you will find yourself an integral part of the story. Beyond the news are promotional events that become news or are seen by thousands, or both. Below are a few examples from actual PR events to give you ideas of your own.

The Expert

If your company sells products, chances are you are an expert regarding those products. If you offer a service then you probably are an expert. Make sure people know why the product or service is important to them and how it can improve their lives. Give them helpful advice. Then make sure that people know you can be a source of important information about that product. You won't be selling your company directly, but indirectly. Make up a news release and send it to local newspapers, TV news departments, talk radio outlets and the like. Make sure the release is no more than one page. Assignment editors at news outlets have famously short attention spans. Try to get their attention in the first sentence. It is common for financial advisors, pet care experts and others to build their businesses by dispensing free advice on shows where they are regular unpaid guests.

The Feel-Good Story

A decade ago New York City endured a series of massive blizzards. Police, fire, sanitation and all city workers spent a winter digging endless mounds of snow. When the weather finally broke, a little deli in midtown Manhattan decided to say thanks. They constructed a block-long hero "for New York's heroes." They invited city workers to show up for a wedge. Their gesture of thanks was covered by every major news outlet and received prominent coverage on all the New York TV stations and newspapers. It was a small investment

in ingredients. What made this a giant story, was imagination.

The Friend-in-Need Good Deed

When Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, many little businesses that depended on tourist foot traffic were put in peril. When floods ravaged Northeastern Pennsylvania in 2006 more businesses drowned.

Solid Cactus teamed up with Yahoo! to help. They went to both areas, spent several days and provided businesses with free online training and website designs. They literally built the sites, photographed the products and got new e-businesses up and running in a day. Not only was this a nice gesture, it became news. In addition, media companies got involved to help promote the Northeastern Pennsylvania event, running PSA's on several different radio stations.

The Expert's List

The American Kennel Club is an example of an expert getting regular publicity. For years national publications have published the AKC's annual list of the most popular dogs. How to get attention more than once a year? The AKC changed the list and made it regional (who knew that the dachshund is in the top 10 some places but not others?). The result was more publicity for the club and more regional interest by adding a new twist to an old story.

The Civil Disobedience Stunt

A city banned smoking in bars and restaurants. One café did its legal

homework and rolled the dice. They called the news, took down the "no smoking" signs and replaced the ashtrays. The owners paid $600 in fines, but in the process they were on TV news, radio talk shows and the front page of the local papers for days while they fought the ordinance. They got thousands in "free" publicity—and in the end—the ordinance was overturned and their fines refunded!

There are many roads to Rome. Get news outlets interested in your company, your products, your services or your expertise.

Keep your releases simple and direct. Grab the spotlight with events, stunts and attention-getters. Remember, great PR involves moxie, not money. **eBiz**

By Kevin Lynn

Kevin Lynn began his broadcasting career in 1976 and his mug has been seen on WPIX-TV, WBRE-TV, CBS, WBBM-TV and ESPN Sportscenter. Today, he spends his early mornings as a radio talk show host and spends his afternoons polishing the numerous awards he received for his on-air work. Kevin can be reached via e-mail at kevinl @ebizinsider.com.

Communicate, Don't Decorate

Rotating logos are most often a bad idea. It is important to have strong branding but not at the expense of communicating to your customer. Neither Flash nor corporate branding should interfere with your marketing and sales agenda. The best way to brand your business is to provide a righteous e-commerce experience and customers will remember you.

"Perfection is not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."

The above statement is especially relevant in relation to web design and its best practices. Too often websites are built for design's sake only. Websites loaded with flair and dazzling details can draw more attention to themselves than to the site's message and purpose.

When More is Less

Remember—we are not hanging websites on our walls, we are delivering content. When approaching the design phase of your website, it's easy to get lost in the details and forget about the end user. The sad reality is that most users are not interested in the "art" of your website. What they do care about is getting relevant information quickly and then moving on. Decorative designs might attract amateurs or first time buyers but they will only annoy regular online shoppers. Great web design delivers and communicates information by making it obvious. Ironically, a great web design that successfully communicates without distracting the readers or shoppers attention is too often overlooked and considered plain, boring, or unimaginative.

This is not to discourage creative and visual web design but instead to encourage the benefits of context. The key is the knowledge of what distinguishes the differences between all forms of design verses art. That difference is communicating its purpose. By all means, strive to have an original website which delivers style, intrigue and emotion. Bad design is not original and

it plagues the web. Look around and you are bound to find far more badly designed sites and content presentation than you are clear and presentable websites.

Convenience, usability and marketing clarity are even more important than price for online shoppers.

What Works?

Do some homework and investigate successful e-commerce websites or websites you already like. The best way to determine what works for them and what might work for you is to adopt the role of a shopper. Was it the flash animation and spinning logo with the dropped shadow text that kept you there? Was it the chaotic color choices and unreadable small type that made you want to shop? Maybe it was waiting for the images to load and the 3D menu. Or was it the ability to navigate to the product you were interested in and having that product be available at a price that was reasonable all the while being visually pleasing?

Nine out of ten times everything in the right context - design, functionality and content- is what kept you as a returning customer.

Know Your Design Goals

Assuming you already have a business plan in place, create a list of objectives and goals and pass those details on to your designer. The more information you can provide about your vision the better. Allow the designer to create a visual representation of your purpose for you. It goes without saying that learning to trust your design team has to be earned, even if only on the merits of their previous work. Trust does have to happen in order for "everything in the right place" to work successfully.

When planning for your web design or communicating your visions to the design team, focus on the information first. Too many times keywords like "pretty," "cool," "stylish" and "super-duper" over step the website's purpose. For e-commerce, the concentration should be on how your products are displayed and organized. How easy will it be for the average user to navigate, check out and get to the shopping cart? Believe it or not, this is as relevant to web design as it is to web programming.

Key Areas of Concentration:

1. *K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple Stupid)*
Do not rely on a design that makes your user think. Choose a design that is clear. If the user can not find the direction and order they need, they will soon grow exasperated and give up.

2. *Use a Strong Color Scheme.*
Two or three colors relating to your brand and "feel" should be sufficient. Too much color can distract instead of deliver. The repetitiveness and creative use of color placement within the design can be a visual guide for the user. It can also create a familiar and comfortable atmosphere, all while highlighting your brand.

3. *Use Decorative Fonts Sparsely*
There are many benefits of using real text over decorative image fonts for areas of your website. Search engine optimization, typography control (ability to change text, color, and size), offering the ability to copy and paste text, bandwidth usage, and so on. If you are going to reply on decorative fonts

within your design keep them to minimal usage. For instance, decorative fonts work well for headlines and logos, but it is best not to use an image-based menu system. All menus should be dynamic and editable. Briefly, web design and print design are two different monsters; your design should allow interaction and administrative modification. There are plenty of creative ideas to get html typography to present itself in an original way. Although the choices seem slim, readable fonts are the default for the web for a reason. Using them does not stifle originality; it enforces usability and encourages creativity for any professional design team.

Non editable image based menu

Stylish CSS based dynamic menus
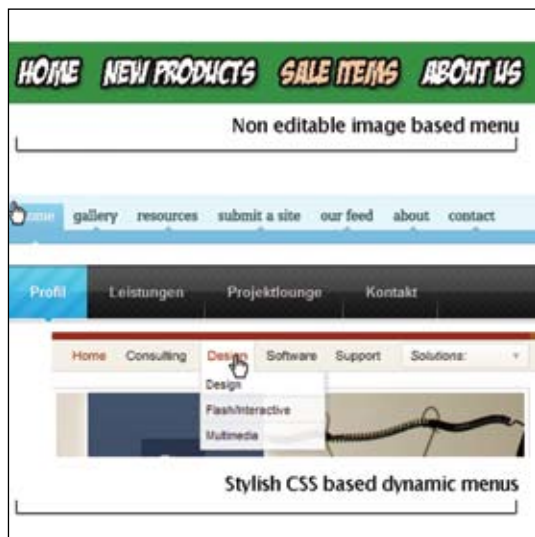
Remember Your Customers

Do not underestimate a creative logo, header and color scheme with original content presentation. By keeping web design decoration and flair to a minimum and focusing on the overall purpose of the website you are allowing the customer to focus on the product. Great web design should almost be transparent, or at least fluent enough to deliver that product and/or a company's brand by enhancing it but not over taking it. Delivering a clear and coherent whole effect with a relevant and appropriate web design is a key element to a website's success. **eBiz**

By Chris Pawloski

Chris Pawloski has over a decade of experience in web design and programming and is a graduate of The Art Institute of Philadelphia. Little known fact about Chris: He worked with the traveling Van Gogh Exhibit for the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Chris can be reached via e-mail at chrisp@ebizinsider.com.

Tech Corner:
Protecting Your Computer from Spyware

Spyware is Internet jargon meaning Advertising Supported Software, or "Adware." Spyware monitors computer activity and transmits data without your knowledge. This information is usually stored in a database on the infected system. Spyware is not illegal but can create nightmares through poor system performance and annoying pop-up ads.

Protect your system with antivirus software such as Symantec or McAfee Anti-Virus. Ad-Aware by Lavasoft is the most popular free software. There is AOL Active Virus Shield and Spybot Search and Destroy. Windows Defender can be downloaded for Windows XP and comes automatically with Windows Vista. These programs are designed to remove adware and spyware from your computer.

Guard Your Network!

Create a company policy on software installation and Internet Explorer settings. Don't load shareware or freeware on company machines. Block sites sending ad requests from your web browser to the computer's loop-back address. Add 127.0.0.1 bad_site.com in the host file. The computer's Internet browser will look at the host file first before sending a DNS request for the ad site content. The result will appear blank in the browser, so no spyware or cookies will be loaded. You can download Gorills Design Studio's list which has over 17,000 entries.

Other Safeguards:

Firewalls prevent unauthorized system access. IT is the first line of defense in protecting you from attacks of spyware, adware, malware, worms and hackers.

Beware of phishing. This is when you get an official-looking e-mail from a fake company. Do not use a link in your own e-mail that provides personal information.

Security patches close operating system holes.

Use encryption software to protect vital data from prying eyes. **eBiz**

By Dave Thomas

Dave Thomas provides technical advice each month. Have a question for Dave? Get is answered here! Drop him an e-mail at davidt@ebizinsider.com.

Cashing in on PPC:
How to Improve ROI on Your Campaigns

Pay-Per-Click marketing is easy!!

- Select keywords that you THINK are relevant to your products or services; put them into broad match on the "Big 3" engines (Google, Yahoo, & MSN) and leave them on auto pilot.

- Check on them periodically, maybe once or twice a week to make sure you're not spending too much money.

- Ignore the free conversion tracking solution, because as long as you're making money overall you really don't need to know the ROI from each marketing channel.

I WAS KIDDING!!! Yes, the above is completely wrong, but you would be amazed if you knew how often it happens. I get the stories daily from potential clients. Some small-to mid-size businesses literally spend thousands per month on this medium without ever leveraging the capabilities these engines have to offer. The worst, though, when you ask them what their ROI was on a keyword, they're dumbfounded!

How do you actually cash in on this marketing channel? The steps below can lead you to a better ROI.

Keyword Strategy

Keywords, Keywords, Keywords. Analyze the fundamentals of Pay-Per-Click marketing and it all comes back to keywords. I cannot stress enough the importance of keyword selection. Before you leap, look at the following:

Define your target demographics for your business offerings.

Put yourself in their shoes and imagine every variation of keywords possible that leads to finding your products and services.

Invest in keyword research tools, as these will allow you to find new variations of keywords, as well as confirm that the keywords you have chosen are actually being searched by the end consumer. While there are many out there, a few of my favorites are: Wordtracker, Keyword Discovery, and Keyword Elite.

Leveraging the "Big 3" Engines

Once you have these keywords, then what? First, make sure your keywords are being represented on the "Big 3" engines (Google, Yahoo, and MSN). These big 3 allow the advertiser to take advantage of different advanced techniques. When

you leverage these techniques it will enable you to not only compete with your competitors and the big players, but also get the most bang for your advertising dollars. Keep these suggestions in mind:

1) Break the keywords into two sets – Research phrased keywords (i.e.: Apple Ipod, Apple Ipod Reviews) vs

buying cycle keywords (Buy Apple Ipod, Purchase Apple Ipod, Apple Ipod Sale, etc). This will allow you to create different strategies in the long run (branding focused, ROI focused, aggressive bidding, day parting, etc).

2) Make sure each ad group is broken down into similar sets of keywords (i.e.: SET 1: Ipod Nano, Ipod Nano 4gb,

Ipod Nano 2GB...SET 2: Ipod Shuffle, Ipod Shuffle 2GB, etc, as this will enable you to create targeted advertising text pertaining to these keywords. This strategy will help you increase your click through ratio (CTR rates) as well as your overall quality score which will translate into higher positions at lower costs.

3) Take advantage of the advanced matching options (Google/MSN – Broad, Phrase, Exact, Yahoo – Standard/Advanced). These matching options allow you to better define your keywords, resulting in more qualified traffic. Google/MSN allows you to have all 3 options for each keyword (test them out and see which provides you with a better ROI, as the competition level on each of these techniques will be different).
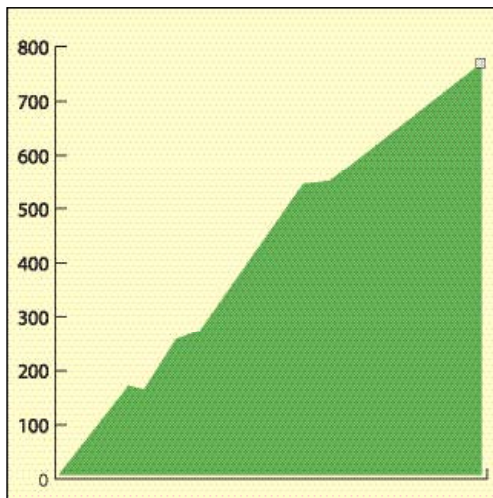
Howard Geschwind of Spytown.com reported nearly 800% increase in PPC conversions in the first month of his campaign using good keyword strategies.

4) Other matching options that should be utilized in a phased approach are:

Negative match – Use this keyword option to refine your campaigns, as you don't really want your ad showing keywords that won't convert (i.e.: Free Ipod).

Contextual Network – As a default I would recommend having this option turned off as you could end up spending a lot of money without really getting any returns. This option should be done strategically. When you find out which keywords are performing/meeting your required ROI, segment them into a different contextual-only campaign. This way you can see if this strategy makes sense for that set of keywords, and modify them at any time without hurting your overall performance.

Site Targeting - Allows you to cherry-pick sites that are relevant to your products or services, hence capturing that low hanging fruit.

Day Parting - If you know the time slot

which accounts for the majority of your visitors/sales, you may want to take advantage of this information. You can target your advertising only during those times, hence allowing you to focus your energy and dollars aggressively. This will minimize your overall advertising spend as you will not be wasting your money during off-peak hours.

Analytics

The amazing part of the PPC channel is that it allows advertisers to track their ROI down to the keyword level. Add in the fact that this solution is free and requires maybe 5 minutes of your time; you should take advantage of it. The "Big 3" engines provide a conversion tracking code that is available for no cost and with a little modification will capture your sales value for you. Use it!

Get analytics down to the keyword level. Focus most of your energy on them while creating different strategies based upon that keyword. (Envision the entire Internet Marketing spectrum- SEO, Affiliate, Media Buys, Social Networking, etc)

Get Google Analytics, which is also free. It will allow you to track traffic/goals in a detailed manner while allowing you to get your ROI data from different marketing initiatives. Google Analytics integrates seamlessly with your Google Adwords account.

Action

In conclusion, follow the above steps and you will be on your way to leveraging the PPC marketing channel and getting the most bang for your advertising buck. Don't be afraid to test different keywords and approaches. They will help you better understand your end consumers and that will help your ROI. **eBiz**

By Farukh Shroff

Farukh Shroff is considered one of the top Internet marketing experts in the country as well as a true pioneer and leading voice of the industry who helps clients with affiliate marketing management, search engine marketing and optimization and media management. Farukh can be reached via e-mail at farukhs@ebizinsider.com.

Using Microsoft Outlook to Help You Get Through the Work Day

Wouldn't it be great to squeeze another hour or two from your workday? To have the information you need when you need it? Well, Microsoft's Outlook will do all of this and more with its calendar and e-mail program.

Technology was supposed to make our lives simpler. Modern computers seem to be the antithesis. Outlook, if used right, can free up more time and make you much more efficient at your job.

Begin a Routine

Remember, the concept is to use as little of Outlook as you need to do your job better. Three important reminders: use it consistently, keep it simple and be honest with yourself. Know your limits when you schedule your day so you can realistically achieve your goals. Outlook offers you many tools, most of which I never use. Be careful, or you will find yourself dividing your time between Tasks, Scheduled Events, E-Mails, and the other Outlook options.

Don't Overload Your Plate

When integrating Outlook into your workflow system, remember that the more areas you monitor, the harder it will be to stick to your new system. When you schedule something, give it the respect it deserves, whether it is a board meeting or a 15 minute break at the local Starbucks. If it is important enough to be on the calendar, do it on the schedule you set. Remember, you put that small task on the calendar because it needed to be done. I separated some of Outlook's benefits into 3 categories: Save More Time Features, Save Your Neck Features and Enhanced Workflow Features.

1. Save More Time Features

1.1. Schedule Meetings. Place the meeting agenda in the body message so everyone is aware of the meeting's focus and can plan ahead. If you have a handout, attach it to the meeting request so attendees can familiarize themselves with the content ahead of time, rather than while you are speaking.

1.2. Schedule Follow Ups. Reading e-mail takes time. Re-reading your e-mail wastes time, especially when you are trying to remember the context of the message a week later. As soon as you read an e-mail, act on it. If you must wait to act, leverage the Outlook calendar and schedule a follow up. In the body of the follow up, quickly summarize the point of the e-mail. Then briefly list action items and due dates.
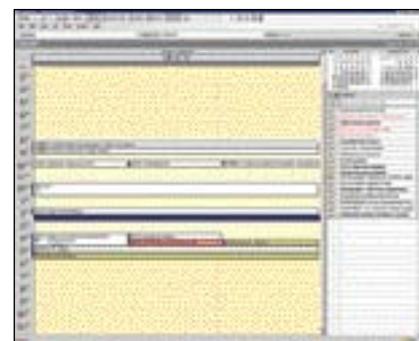
1.3. Tasks. Sometimes you need to pass work along. When you need to, follow up to ensure that the task was done. You can use the e-mail Follow Up reminders and create a system of e-mail folders. It provides a centralized location for all outstanding tasks. I prefer to just attach the preliminary e-mail to an Outlook Task in order to give the recipient the entire conversation thread. Be sure to summarize what needs to be done in the body of the Task. Be sure to reassign any tasks you missed.
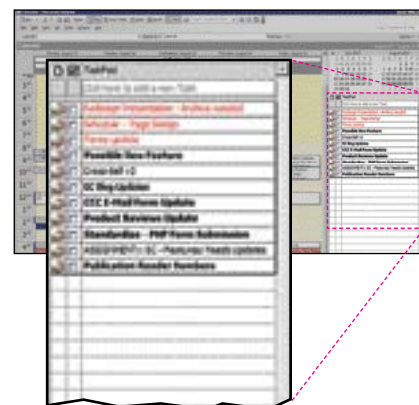
1.4. Google Desktop. Right, Google has nothing to do with Outlook, but its desktop search tool will index your Outlook e-mail (If you move your e-mails from the inbox, as you should, you'll need to watch out for Outlook's cache setting which affects the way Google stores your e-mail information). Save time organizing your subfolders; Google lets you search for what you want when you want it.

1.5. Update the subject line. Read your e-mail, double click the subject line to edit it, add a few choice keywords that describe the message and then save it as a topic you're likely to remember. The next time you need to find that e-mail on Shipping Costs to Canada, you'll thank me.

1.6. If you have recurring tasks, set the recurrence pattern for it on your calendar. This is a great way to set reminders for your bi-monthly early bleary eyed Mondays when you have doughnut duty.

2. Save Your Neck Features

2.1. Read Receipts and Delivery Receipts. Murphy's Law says that if your e-mail absolutely must reach a recipient, it probably won't. Next time you need to know that a recipient received your message, set a read/delivery receipt for the message by going to View > Options.

2.2. Save your e-mail. Outlook lets you organize your inbox. Save all of your e-mail. You never know when you'll need to find a piece of information. I organize my e-mail by year, then by quarter. Find a system that works for you, just beware of time-wasting methods. Google Desktop search allows you to be somewhat lax in your organizing.

3. Enhance Your Workflow Features

3.1. Review your daily tasks each morning and at days' end. By focusing on your calendar for your personal tasks, you'll have an overview of everything that is expected of you.

3.2. Synchronize your calendar with your PDA. A schedule only works if you remember what you have to do and when. With a synchronized calendar, you don't have to worry about memorizing where to be and when. The PDA will remember for you.

3.3. Make it easy on yourself. Schedule the information you will need for a particular time. Remembering a colleague's phone number or directions are often useless until you are ready to use them. Schedule it, and forget about it until it is nearly time for the event.

3.4. Use the "Flags" feature to notify you of an e-mail needing attention. However, if you have flagged too much e-mail, you may need to revaluate your workflow process. Even low priority e-mail needs to be addressed in a timely manner before little problems become big ones. Any e-mail that won't be addressed today should be scheduled on your calendar.

Remember, your computer is a tool. Figure out how its features can make your life easier. Outlook is a great place to start! **eBiz**
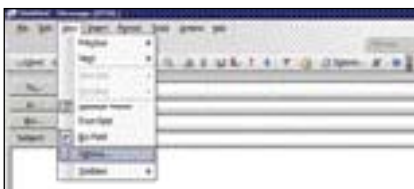
By Miguel Younger

Miguel Younger started his career as an Art Director and today oversees numerous departments working with department heads to implement time management and leadership skills among the team. Miguel can be reached via e-mail at miguely@ebizinsider.com.

Get Fresh!
Why Redesigning Your Site is Important

I write this piece, or something like it, every year at about this time. This is the pre-holiday rush for e-commerce operators. This is when they have to decide what, if anything, they should do with their websites to be ready for the holiday season. This is when I remind people to take a look around their site as they might if it were a brick-and-mortar store. Then ask, is it fresh? Is it current? Does it answer the questions customers will ask? Will it sell what I offer?

Change is Key

It is important to redesign your website every 2 years at the most. I promise this is not my mantra. I admit it is self-serving for my business, but it is still true. It is critical to demonstrate to your customers that your site is state of the art. It's what they expect. Don't be fooled by the fiction that cyberspace is huge with a shopping pool to match. The fact is, your business will rise or fall on your regular customers. If your site is stale, the regulars will notice. And while they may be familiar and they may be regular, they may also assume because the site is the same that your products haven't changed either.

"Greekgear.com needed a redesign for a simple reason. Websites need to look fresh and hip for their customers. Make no mistake, our business is doing great. But my wife's family has a brick-and-mortar store, and they update every two or three years. The fact is the Internet is changing. More people are shopping online, and they expect us to change, just like conventional stores."

—Joe Tantillo, Greekgear.com

The Sooner the Better

Only you will decide if it's time to redesign, but here's a hint. Ask your friends, confidants and others whom you trust to visit your site. Ask them for their impressions. If they are regular surfers and they aren't impressed, that's a sign. If you have an area for customer feedback and comment, monitor it. What are your people saying about you? Another hint is the mirror test. Ask yourself, "is my site still hot compared to the others in my industry?" If the answer is anything

short of a resounding—YES!—you have your answer, don't you?

There are two other, more practical reasons to strike sooner than later. First, you want your shoppers to be used to your new site. So it's best to be up BEFORE they start buying for the holidays. Second, and perhaps equally important, if you have made improvements in your site content with respect to the search engines, you'll want to give the site time to move higher in the search rankings

Brick-and-mortar merchants know the value of updating their stores every two or thre years. It is important to keep your site fresh as well.

Improve the Process

Redesigns help improve conversions in several ways. First, any redesign should make your site work better. Search engine algorithms are constantly changing, so it's a good idea to update your site with a cleaner code that will help optimize your site for good rankings.

You should also take advantage of newer features that might not have been available in the past. Remember, it was only a few years ago that we didn't have airbags in cars. Now they're standard equipment, As Products Reviews are now an integral part of the online shopping experience. If you don't have the feature you should definitely add it. Checkout design has improved dramatically as well in the last couple of years. These improvements make it better for your shoppers. You can't afford not to investigate them.

Over the years, you probably have added a lot of piece-mail items to your site. They may not all be tied together as tightly as they should, so a redesign will help make them look like they belong together. Of course any redesign should also make your site and products more attractive.

Watch Your Back!

Big brand sites have evolved. It is more important than ever to pay attention to what the 800 pound gorillas are doing in your industry. You should benefit from their millions of dollars in market research. But as those sites evolve, yours should too. Please don't take this "monitoring" as encouragement to rip the competition off – it's important to be original and unique. Still, there is a lot to be learned from the major retailers. The fact is, large or small your competition has gotten better over the years and a redesign will once again set you apart.

Watch Your Bottom Line

Redesigns can also help with cross selling and increasing the average dollar value of each order. A well-designed site is intriguing as well. It will interest shoppers and help convince them to dig more deeply into your store. When they do they may discover other products of interest.

I hate when I say this because it is so self-serving, but I don't care. It's true. Do NOT be fooled by today's success. No matter what industry you're in, the brick-and-mortar big boys are waking up. They didn't succeed in old retail by accident and they'll expect to succeed in cyberspace. Your advantage is that you were out here first. Make sure you keep that advantage. Redesign to stay fresh, to stay nimble and to stay successful. And most of all, believe that old sports adage: *"If you're not getting better, you're getting worse."*
eBiz

By Justin Rattigan

Justin Rattigan has been active in the e-commerce industry since he started his own design firm in 1999. He has served on the board of directors of the eMerchant's Association, and is a moderator in the Yahoo! Store Owners' Forum where his advice to other merchants is invaluable. Justin can be reached via e-mail at justinr@ebizinsider.com.

Holiday Preparation

▶ Starts Today!

SOLIDCACTUS®
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Call us at **888.361.9814**
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extended to
July 11th
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Order a redesign before June 29th and receive these features:

FREE rotating customer testimonials.

They will show a new glowing testimonial on every page of your store. The testimonials deal directly with customer confidence - the #1 reason someone does not order from a merchant.

FREE search marketing evaluation.

This will ensure you are maximizing your marketing dollars with QUALIFIED traffic during the holidays.

FREE Google Analytics Installation.

This lets you monitor your visitors and customers better by tracking popular pages, where visitors are coming from, keywords that they are using to find your website and much more.

Spotlight:
TylerTool.com Reaps the Rewards

Solid Cactus was contracted to overhaul Tyler's site design, navigational functionality and code in 2006. The results:

- **1** 23% increase in conversion rates (visitors turned to customers)
- **2** 34% increase in items per order which in turn generated 18% more revenue per order
- **3** 12% increase in natural (FREE) search engine traffic

The most important number...

21% INCREASE IN REVENUE OVER LAST HOLIDAY SEASON!

Holiday Prep Checklist

Serious e-commerce begins with the holidays. Verisign reported 2006 holiday sales were up 21% over 2005. Gas prices are higher, mall lines longer and consumers are looking to the web for better prices, better selection and no travel. How do you get this growing market to choose your store?

The following guidelines will help you maximize sales.

Get Inside Your Shopper's Head

Millions of people are like me. We know the Internet is fast, so we procrastinate and shop late.

How can we market to this type of consumer?

☐ **Hit the pain.** Remind them why they're online. Display a graphic on your homepage that says….

"Avoid the lines and shop with us online! Check out our money-saving holiday specials…."

☐ **List your offers.** Make sure the deals connect with your consumers.

☐ **Sell their wallets.** Customers don't want to pay for gas or shipping costs. Offer free shipping.

☐ **Reassure them.** Guarantee delivery if orders are made before a certain date. Guarantee delivery with express delivery options.

☐ **Offer services.** Offer free gift wrapping and cards with a personalized message. This saves last minute shoppers some time.

☐ **Match prices.** If there's a better bargain, match it.

☐ **Use flash.** Flash increases consumer confidence and draws attention through movement. Flash allows you to fit more within a small area without crowding.

Merchandise

Start tracking products and trends now. Find out what the big guys in your industry are doing. Feature the hot items prominently on the homepage. Showcase deals in a holiday-themed section.

☐ **Sell suggestively.** Feature gifts for Mom, Dad, Him, Her, etc.

Market!

All roads involve search engines.

☐ **Pay-per-click** remains the best way to get people from the search engines to your store. You can control when your ads are displayed, what is displayed, and where the visitor lands when clicking the ad.

☐ **Shopping comparison engines (SCE's)** such as Google Products (formerly Froogle), Nextag, Shopping.com, etc. are increasingly popular. Feed management tools get your products in the engines and provide ROI analytics at a product level. One example is FeedPerfect by Solid Cactus.

☐ **Affiliate programs** are typically pay-for-performance; you only pay if they deliver. Arm these programs with holiday graphics and banners showcasing your specials.

☐ **The best customer is a regular customer.** Personalize a special coupon code for "preferred customers." Giving your regulars an exclusive deal goes a long way.

When mass e-mailing, make sure you have the following…

☐ **E-mail programs maximize delivery.** Exact Target, Got Campaigner Pro, etc. block spam. Companies trust the e-mail coming from them and more e-mail will reach your intended recipients.

☐ **Use well-designed HTML e-mail,** but don't make it a mirror image of your homepage.

☐ **Personalize.** Start the e-mail with "Dear <first name>, as a valued customer of <your store name>" then go into your offers, showcased items, gift suggestions, etc.

☐ **Call to Action.** A sign saying "Start shopping" or "Don't wait another minute – click here" will work.

☐ **Be consistent.** Touch the pain of shopping offline, tell people why they should shop with you, create urgency and have a call to action. Put this message on every page (remember, more people land on inner pages than the homepage).

Be Creative on a Shoestring

☐ **Hold a contest.** Have visitors submit names, e-mail, and mailing addresses for a chance to win a product (make it valuable!)

delivered to them, gift wrapped, before the holidays.

☐ **Use the list** you have just created for holiday shoppers. E-mail everyone if they "Shop now for the holidays – Guaranteed delivery if orders received by 12/XX Midnight." Showcase your offers and don't forget the call to action.

Inspire Customer Confidence

Offers and pricing won't matter if people don't trust you. Dispel their fears.

☐ **Identity theft.** Install a "click here" link to explain your site's security. Yahoo! Store owners should explain why its encryption is important to consumers. Carry your site design and branding through the shopping cart and carry your security messages through checkout.

☐ **Fly-by-night operations.** Your "about us" page should eliminate these concerns by including your mission statement, how long you've been in business, your location, your customer service goals, a picture of your building and the people who work there. Personalize your store.

☐ **State your policies.** Shopping cart abandonment often results from the charges at checkout. Explain shipping and tax charges. Explain your exchange and return policies.

☐ **Bad customer service.** Make toll-free numbers and contact information prominent on every page of the site and have enough people on those phones. Some online shoppers still need to place their orders by phone. Make sure they can.

☐ **Testimonials.** A customer's words speak loudly – showcase glowing reviews on every page.

☐ **Product reviews.** Big guys like Amazon are using product reviews for a reason. Amazon praising a product they're selling won't sell it; a customer praising it, will.

Prepare the Team

Higher volumes require more people. Most merchants increase customer service and fulfillment staff 25% during the holidays.

☐ **Get your people now** so you won't have to scramble when you need them. A $50 employee bonus for hooking a friend up with a job is a good incentive.

☐ **Train them well.** They should know your shipping and tax policies, your values for customer service and answer product questions. Make sure they have cheat sheets for gift ideas, can handle price matching and know your promotions. Sales through in-bound calls will mirror the knowledge of your customer service staff.

Live chat can cut down on customer service calls and allow reps to handle multiple customers with simultaneous chats.

Get Started Now!

Prepare your website, offers, marketing strategy and customer service now for fewer headaches, unexpected problems and potential disappointments. **eBiz**

By Sean Gove

In between making a list and checking it twice, Sean Gove spends his time working on eye catching and wallet grabbing marketing campaigns. Ask for a lump of coal, e-mail him at seang@ebizinsider.com.

Dynamic Paging –
# Design with Your Customers in Mind

Section pages are like a virtual customer service rep for an e-commerce site. At their best, they can help customers find what they want by presenting a well-organized grouping of products. A good section page will offer not just a number of products, but also a variety of ways to sort them (price, style, specs). The best section pages actually help clinch the deal by offering such sensible groupings that they appear to read the customer's mind. These "groupings" can vary depending on the type of product being sold and the audience who is buying them.

The Challenge

There's a good reason that most store owners don't properly group and organize their products: it's hard to do. "You've got to think about each category on its own - what are the criteria for each one?" says Jacob Nielsen, a usability expert. Even with all the facts, you can run into multiple problems because not every customer's mind works the same way.

Different customers think differently about the same item. Either they call it something different or use it for something different than its common description. As consumers get smarter (or quirkier) in their shopping, store owners have to also get smarter. It is especially challenging when store owners, who are so familiar and connected to their product line, are trying to categorize their products in a way that the "average" customer would find the most attractive. Try defining "average." I dare you.

This poses an interesting challenge: How can we best react to the multiple ways that consumers sort and filter information? How can we make it easier for them to find what they are looking for? How do we get them to come to our websites, stay engaged in our websites, and ultimately buy from us? Dynamic Paging, a fancy word for allowing customers to do their own product categorization, is the solution.
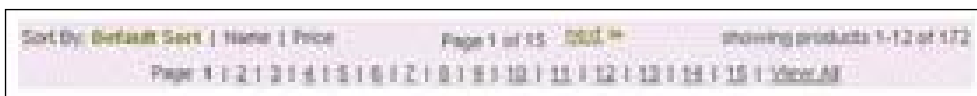
Dynamic Paging gives customers an easy way to find products, at both the top and bottom of the page.

How Dynamic Paging Works

Dynamic Paging is a way to sort items on the section page. Section page sorting allows users—that is, buyers—to choose the products they want listed and the criteria by which they're listed. Bringing products with certain criteria to the top of the page can be particularly useful for customers who aren't exactly sure what they want. This is especially true if there are a large number of products in that particular section of the website.

The default usage of Dynamic Paging is sufficient for most online stores. Most default pagination gives customers three ways to sort product listings: by the original (default) way the items were entered into the page by the store owner, by name, and by price.

Why You Want Dynamic Paging

If customers look at products different ways, Dynamic Paging helps them and you sort products in categories most attractive to them. You can customize sorting options according to the client's specific niche/needs, but they often require additional programming. If your customers are price-conscious (and whose aren't?), you may choose to list the products in order of price, from least to most expensive. A book store should want the capability to sort by best sellers, new releases, publication date, or author. A camera store would want to be able to sort by brand, price, mega-pixel count or the kind of photography for which the camera is intended.

Dynamic Paging is essential for helping consumers to find the products they seek. Consumers are getting smarter in the ways that they shop. Comparison shopping is becoming extremely popular, and the general public's increasing levels of sophistication when buying online

means they're likely to jump back and forth between similar stores (i.e. visit the competition!) in a matter of seconds. Providing effective sorting for product listings can make your products more attractive, more top of mind and ultimately play a major part in helping your customers find what they want and buy it from you.

Get Professional Help

A good design team can customize the look and feel of your Dynamic Paging feature. Have this done by pros. Typically they'll change fonts and colors to match the color scheme of the site. Dynamic Paging is not necessarily a design feature, it's a usability feature. The feature itself has already been designed to make the shopping experience the best for the shopper without "getting in the way" of your product listings. The key is to make shoppers aware of their options. Many designers place the paging navigation both above and below the listed products to aid in navigation. The store owner can decide how many products they would like to list per page.

Summing Up

Overall, Dynamic Paging makes visiting your website an easy experience for customers. After all, that is the point, isn't it? Happy customers finding what they want easily will lead to buying customers and happy e-business owners. Dynamic Paging lets you design the store the way you like, and lets your customers shop your store the way they like. Your customers will thank you for it and your business will benefit. **eBiz**

By Amy Fedele

Amy Fedele has over ten years of graphic and web design experience and has designed over 250 websites based on ideas, goals and suggestions from the client, while incorporating her knowledge and expertise of design to enhance the site's visual appeal and usability. Amy can be reached via e-mail at amyf@ebizinsider.com.

Live Help-the Virtual CSR

Derek Kleinow of TigerGPS.com wanted to improve customer service on his website. TigerGPS.com provides GPS positioning technology for cars, hand-held sets, wrist-mounted models and the like. He wanted people to find his site, shop and buy. "We wanted their questions answered," Derek explained, "but we wanted to reduce the call volume. At the same time we wanted to increase chat and website access activity." Who did they call? TigerGPS.com went with the market leader, LivePerson.com.

"LivePerson.com provides online sales and online customer service for e-businesses," says Philippe Lang, Vice President of LivePerson.com. "Basically, Live Chat with LivePerson Pro will help you sell more and provide better customer service. You'll be able to provide better customer support and reduce operating costs."

How Live Chat Works

Live Chat with LivePerson Pro facilitates communications between your CSR and your customer by offering hosted services on demand. There is no software, agents or operatives required, as the services are provided from a secure data center.

Suppose a customer comes to your site, gets ready to buy but has a question about shipping. With a click the customer can instantly contact a customer service rep (CSR) while online and get answers. The CSR

has lots of information on the customer as well, including where they're located, which search engine they used to find you and what products they may have bought from you in the past. CSR's can chat with multiple customers at once, or transfer customers to other support if necessary.

Now suppose a customer has been logged onto your site for 15 minutes and hasn't

purchased anything. Or, suppose they've been at Checkout but haven't completed the purchase. These are signs the customer could need help. From the other end the CSR can now get actively involved with the customer. The CSR can supply information, provide reassurance and help to close the transaction. "LivePerson Pro provides help in real time," says Philippe. "Customers can request a chat, or you can request to chat with the customer if you see he or she is struggling or undecided."

The Keyword Connection

LivePerson Pro can also supply crucial keyword information. It will show which keywords visitors are using to find you. It will highlight the keywords they use to make purchases and the keywords that bring in the most money. "LivePerson Pro lets you optimize any online marketing campaign," says Philippe. "By identifying the keywords customers use to find you, you can compare them with the keywords you're buying. LivePerson Pro lets you adjust so you can drop the non-performing keywords and add better ones."

Why LivePerson Pro?

There are several companies that provide the same services as LivePerson.com and do so for less money. Philippe Lang, not surprisingly, thinks LivePerson Pro is worth the extra money. "We have more experience than the other providers. In the first place, we're the only live chat provider that is Hacker Safe certified. Second, we provide better performance. Because there's no embedded software we're not slowing down your website. Finally, we have 5,000 clients, ten times as many as our next largest competitor. LivePerson Pro is operating at a different level than the rest."


The advantages of live chat are numerous. You can close sales transactions through chat you wouldn't be able to close otherwise.

"Conversion rates for a visitor entering into a chat are five times higher than conversion rates for those not engaging," says Philippe. "The average order size is larger. That's because it is so much easier to cross-sell or up-sell customers when you interact with them than when you don't. As for the cost, a few extra transactions a month, or a few transactions that are larger than they might otherwise have been, will easily pay for the service. We believe LivePerson Pro is a smart investment in your business."

Live Chat Works

TigerGPS.com wanted more information on its customers, better interaction and a healthier bottom line. But they wanted to provide solid answers that would lead to sales and not just result in more talk. "LivePerson.com was able to categorize our e-mail and our chats," says Derek Kleinow. "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."
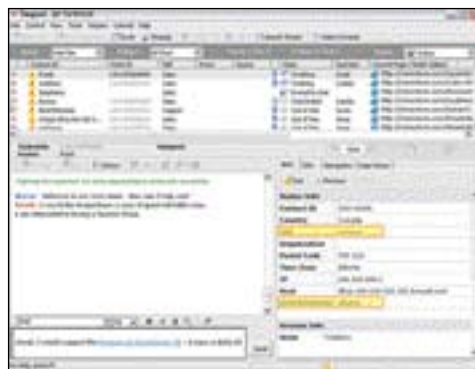
Is LivePerson Pro for you? It's easy enough to find out. Visit the website at LivePerson.com

and take the free tour. Before you visit, ask yourself if actually talking with a customer in real time can help you reach your sales goals. In cyberspace we can operate for less and reach a wider customer pool, but traditionally the transaction was accomplished in anonymity. Not anymore. Now you can selectively reach out to customers and at the same time let them reach out to you. This can improve the overall shopping experience for your customers whether you up-sell, cross-sell or just provide friendly advice to shoppers in need. **eBiz**

By Kevin Lynn

Kevin Lynn began his broadcasting career in 1976 and his mug has been seen on WPIX-TV, WBRE-TV, CBS, WBBM-TV and ESPN Sportscenter. Today, he spends his early mornings as a radio talk show host and spends his afternoons polishing the numerous awards he received for his on-air work. Kevin can be reached via e-mail at kevinl @ebizinsider.com.

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