Selling online: 8 rules to live by

Consumers and business shoppers alike are increasingly turning to the Web to comparison shop, to check prices or availability and to save time. Online retail sales in the United States are expected to top $820 billion in 2018, E-commerce sales are likely to grow to 68% of total retail sales by 2018, up from about 3% in 2002.

Clearly, you are missing key sales opportunities if you do not yet offer friendly e-commerce options.

If you're ready to launch or retool your online store, here are eight rules that are proven to attract customers and turn shoppers into buyers.

1. **Set up a hassle-free infrastructure**. You don't need to hire an HTML expert, an artist or an engineer to create an e-commerce site, anymore. To create a hard-working and well-oiled online retail operation, simply choose among the latest software and outsourcing options for preprogrammed hosting and site building.

   Many packages provide professional design choices as well as other options, such as catalogs for products, pricing displays, order fulfillment systems, an electronic shopping cart, procurement systems with warehouse management and, sometimes, even accounting systems. What's more, purchasing a customized package includes help from experts about bandwidth, site-loading tips, and scalable systems that can accommodate growth.

2. **Functionality, functionality, functionality**. Just as brick-and-mortar stores rely on design and customer traffic conventions to help shoppers find what they want, so, too, should online retailers. Make it as easy as possible. Depending on your offerings, consider a site map to orient customers. Use navigation bars, top and bottom, so users won't have to endlessly scroll to change pages. Consider drop-down menus. Do not force shoppers to rely on the browser's "back" button. Also query customers every so often about where they get lost or irritated. Sometimes, it's the last thing you'd expect.

   For example, take the Massachusetts Bay Trading Company (massbaytrading.com), which sells made-in-Massachusetts products online only. Co-founder Bob Nilsson says the site with static images of various credit cards — just to quickly communicate which cards the company accepts. But shoppers kept trying to click the images, thinking it was a choice. "They'd click and wait and nothing would happen," Nilsson says. "Then we'd get all these complaints about how slow the site was." So Nilsson made the images live links to the order page. The customer knows best.

3. **Target your offerings**. Often, your online shopper has a very different profile than your offline buyer, which is different again from the mail-order catalog customer. Don't forget to research and define your best online customer, via formal focus groups, online surveys or simply by calling around to customers. Figure out which of your products or services are most likely to appeal to online shoppers and streamline your offerings. That goes for free samples, discounts and demos, too. As with every other venue, know your customer and don't make assumptions.

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4. **Maintain design discipline**. When you're designing an online shop, it's easy to want to throw in everything, including the kitchen sink. But we've found that less is more. All the animated graphics for the holidays or adding more stuff to the site just makes it slow to load. It's better to be straightforward. That goes for fancy Flash animations or tedious splash pages as well. And don't forget to match your online design with your offline marketing materials. Everything should be integrated.

5. **Make sure content counts**. You need to offer product descriptions that are easy to read and understand, high-quality photos, and clear purchasing and shipping directions. Too often, online sellers cheap out on content, writing copy themselves or posting blurry or low-resolution images. The results look like Amateur Hour, which makes shoppers conclude that your wares are below par as well. Hire professional copywriters and use a skilled digital photographer. Rely on first-rate scanning gear for analog photos.

    Then figure out how content can best drive sales. For instance, Pinxav, a small Cleveland company founded in 1927, produces a diaper rash cream that is sold at selected retailers. Thirdgeneration owner (by marriage) Gregg Steiner, who lives in Los Angeles, launched its online shop (pinxav.com) a few years back. Online sales now make up about 10% of the company's business. The key is word-of-mouth advertising. To get that buzz, among other tactics, you need a growing channel of useful content. That includes diapering tips, ingredient charts, product comparisons and more. Educate and walk new parents through the process.

6. **Build trust and credibility**. Reassure shoppers that you will deliver as promised and protect their privacy. The biggest mistake new sellers make is not giving enough information about who they are and their background. Customers want to know who they're buying from. For a nominal fee, you can also go through the screening process to carry stamps of approval from consumer advocacy groups such as TRUSTe (www.truste.org) or Better Business Bureau Online (www.bbbonline.org). Offering 100% money-back guarantees further eases customer concerns.

7. **Optimize your opportunities**. Search engines are a fast, cheap way to acquire customers — if your site is properly set up. That means smart and appropriate "meta tags," which is the name for information inserted into Web pages that allows crawler engines to find you. It also means understanding your content management system so that when you refresh copy you don't lose the keywords that engines scan for. Engine rankings and details shift every day. Unless you have technical expertise yourself, hire help.

    To optimize your site for search engines, tap a part-time expert or harness affordable online services such as Microsoft's Submit It!. Software and service options can also track user visits and analyze where people click and how they move through your site. Once you're up and running, investigate use site-traffic analysis services to monitor your successes.

8. **Refresh, refresh, refresh**. Our most successful shops are the most dynamic. Those are the owners who are always working on the shop, updating the text, adding fresh inventory, putting up new photos. Never rest on laurels. Change your "window display," that is, your home page,

often. Keep posting new products, or if that's not an option, surface products from lower pages to the homepage in rotations.

And don't forget rewards. Remember returning customers with something new or special, such as a premium deal or discount. Send out e-mail notices to loyal customers whenever you change inventory or lower prices. You also need to cross-promote. For example, the URL for your online store should be on all your material — from e-mail signatures, shopping bags and in-store signs to business cards and stationery.

The best part of launching an online shop these days is how quickly automated software and services can get you up and going, and they can take care of back-end functionality and operations. All you need do is keep your site up-to-speed and your products up-to-date.