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That means the chief challenge for your marketing today is to define what your customers consider relevant and how to reach and create a relationship with them. However you adapt your message, and whatever media you add to your mix, you'll still need a comprehensive and integrated approach to your marketing and advertising. You don't need me to remind you that marketing dollars are harder than ever to come by these days, and getting the best bang for your hard-won buck is essential. An integrated program lets you build and magnify your impact.

Now and in the next several issues of this column, we will discuss the things that you can do to hot-wire your business by turning your Internet into Inter-connect! This will be the key to retaining existing customers as well as developing new ones.

It's 10 p.m. Do you know where your customers are?



Last November,
**169 million of America's
220 million-plus Internet
users were online;**

51.6 percent
[87.2 million] of them female.

In November,
the average female
went online
54 times for nearly
65 hours total.

**Not convinced the Internet must be part of the
foundation of your marketing efforts these days?
Think again:**

- There were 220,141,969 Internet users in the United States as of June, 2008. That's 72.5 percent of the population, according to Nielsen/NetRatings.
- During the month of November, 2008, Nielsen Online reports that 169 million of those total Internet users were online.
- The November data shows 51.6 percent or 87.2 million of those active online users were female. The average female spent a total of nearly 64 hours and 52 minutes online and logged 54 sessions during the month.
- In November, 2008, 48.4 percent of users (82 million) were male. The average male spent a total of nearly 69 hours and 14 minutes online and logged 60 sessions during the month.
- The Pew Internet & American Life reports that 81 percent of all Internet users look for information online about a service or product they are thinking of buying.
- More than four out of 10 women in their 40s surveyed in October, 2008 by "SheSpeaks" had a social networking profile; 46% of women in the U.S. surveyed by "SheSpeaks" use social networks. And more than 70 percent of women with children ages 13 to 17 had talked about products on social networks, compared with 62 percent of all responding women.
- Online reviews of companies and products are read by 62 percent of Internet users.
- Of these Internet users, 80 percent said that the online reviews affected their buying decision.

You get it: Today's consumer demands information! The absence of information will seriously reduce consumers' trust and their willingness to invest in your brand and your store.

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The chief challenge for your marketing today is to **define what your customers consider relevant** and the best way to reach and create a relationship with them.



No other media meets the consumer's wants and needs for timely information and control better than the Internet. Since the Internet is available with (ideally) up-to-date information 24/7, it allows the consumer total control of when they want to get information, how much information they want to get, and what they will do with it when they get it.

Your customer can put the kids to bed, get comfortable, and browse through as many or as few choices as she needs to find the wall unit/bed/dining chairs she'll be happy to spend some hard-earned money on. She may even find that kind of shopping a bit relaxing.

Then, she can grab a little time out of her beyond-hecktic schedule and show up at your store this week to quickly check the finish, sink into the sofa, and place her order. She doesn't need to start researching from scratch with "May I help you?" after a 10-hour workday or on an errands-crammed weekend.

OK, you're sold. Now, how can you increase the effectiveness of your website to be an even more convenient, comfortable version of your inviting in-store shopping experience? First, absorb the following key criteria:

- A) Everything in your website must work toward your one purpose: to drive the customer into your store.
- B) Complete, persuasive message/content is vital, but so is user-friendly navigation and search engine optimization (SEO).

Then, start working on the top eight things that will make your website meet the above criteria.

1. Make sure your website supports your store's brand promise.

When the consumer visits your website, can she clearly grasp what makes your company special? The message must answer the question, "Why should the consumer shop your store?"

Clearly communicate your store's reason for being — your brand's promise to the consumer. Whether it's a paragraph or two on the "About Us" page or a one-sentence tagline or slogan on each page, tell consumers why they'll want to buy from you.

Great looks at low prices? That will reach the style-aware customer on a budget. Timeless quality for today? That will reach the investment-minded customer who appreciates classic craftsmanship but wants it to fit her modern lifestyle. You get the idea. (Just make sure you're different in a way that's meaningful to consumers).

In addition to great looks, low prices, timeless quality, fit for today's lifestyle mentioned above, you could be the best at lots of choices, fast delivery, custom design services, etc. Some can be combined; others can't. Isolate one or two at which you beat the competition, and run with it. And while you're at it, use this same copy in ALL your materials, ads, in-store signs, mailers, truck signs, press releases, billboards, etc.

2. Understand that in websites, "content is king" and making it easy to access puts you on the royal road to riches.

Look at your website now. Is all the content truly relevant to your customers' needs today? Do you know what information consumers are seeking and do you make it easy for every visitor to find what she is seeking?

What information does she want? Yes, image is important and we're in a visual age, but one picture isn't worth a thousand words. Not when they're spending hard-earned money. You need to provide adequate content, especially descriptions and where more than one option is possible, suggestions for use.

A daybed can be a sofa or bed in a guest room/home office. A soft-cornered ottoman can be a coffee table in a home with toddlers. Whatever would be clear in real life but isn't on the page; from wood tone to workmanship, should be in your content. Be especially careful and accurate with color information as different screens may create variations. (You may want to put that disclaimer on the page and encourage viewers to send for samples or shop in-store).

Research suggests if you have an
integrated marketing program using offline media
to drive consumers to your online site,
you'll gain a greater return from
your advertising investments.

Provide enough content to sell the piece as best you can long-distance. Then, show the product from more than one angle, against a clear, light or white background. No reversed-out type (white type on dark background). Ever. And be sure to have someone knowledgeable check grammar and spelling. Your computer's review function is not at all a substitute!

How easy is it to find information on your site? Is it easy to get where she wants to go from wherever she is on the site? Navigational ease is critical. Make sure she can quickly go from one page or depth of data to another and back again. Shop some sites yourself and you'll see patterns of what works and what doesn't.

3. Do you have a place for the customer to ask questions and a system that guarantees that you will respond to them quickly?

Does the site have a "Contact Us" page for questions on products you show online? A live phone they can call or at least an email address, ideally linked to your "Contact Us" page where they can leave a question and get an answer in 24 hours or less, is important. Just as in your live store, only more so, if she feels stranded or abandoned, she'll walk.

4. Do you have a complete representation of your products online so that the consumer can get a good idea of what they will see when they come to your store?

In addition to clear shots of products, convey your style and romance the product with several photos of in-store vignettes. Add strong copy that clearly communicates the value message, style message, custom-order process, etc.

5. Does your content clearly communicate your guarantees for price and complete customer satisfaction?

Shoppers expect the same (or better!) protection online as in store. To sell her, reassure her.

6. Are you keeping your bounce rate low and your "stickiness" (length of time a viewer stays on your site) high?

If visitors to your site do not quickly see what they are looking for, they will "bounce" away and move to another site. Don't say everything on one page: Browsers are not looking to read an online novel. Instead, give overviews and encourage visitors to spend enough time on your site to find the answer to their questions.

A drop-down, comprehensive list of sub-categories under each major category heading is one easy way to start. Combine that with an open search option where they can type in words in case what they're seeking doesn't happen to be on the list. This function will search for key words in your site. Even if they don't find what they want immediately, your "sticky" site will keep them moving, keep it fun, and will inform and entertain the consumer enough to encourage return visits.

In sum, treat copy like *CNN Headline News* with key points that are short and sweet but complete. Get help if you need it to avoid confusing navigation that requires too many pages/clicks between a browser and your visitor's goal. Less is definitely more. Too many pages/clicks will cause the visitor to "bounce" onto another site.

7. Use Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to help browsers find your website.

Consumers are busy, and they rely on the Internet for fast, fast, fast relief. So high ratings — having your site appear on the first few pages of a particular subject's listings — are essential. Successful organic SEO systems continue to change as the Internet bots/spiders find new ways to eliminate sites that are not really relevant. This constant change means what worked last month to secure a high rating online may not work next month.

In addition, directory listings and pay-per-click strategies must be closely coordinated with


your site to provide substantial ROI. (We will spend an entire issue on SEO strategies in the coming months).

8. Are you changing your website enough to keep her interested?

Just as you need to keep your store looking its best, changing it up regularly, you need to do the same with your website. Adequate content, easy navigation and fresh content (not necessarily new product) are what keep her coming back for more. So never stop asking yourself, "What can I do to improve my website?"

In future issues of *Home Furnishings Retailer*, we'll cover more essential web-based marketing topics, including:

- How to use the Internet to increase business during an economic downturn.
- The ABC's of a successful search engine optimization strategy and the importance of web analytics.
- Developing a successful Internet newsletter strategy.
- Developing an online customer management system that increases frequency shopping and increased sales.

If you work it right, your website will help generate a better return on your advertising investments. Stay with us the next few months as we explore methods that will help you hot-wire your business and get better connected to your customers in 2009! 

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