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Ecommerce: A New Artform

By Rob Spiegel

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What creative project do you have in the back of your mind? Writing that novel? Putting together a bluegrass band? Painting the sunsets over the Rio Grande? How about starting a business?

When you think of the term creative endeavor, does launching or running a business come to mind? To most creative people, business is the antithesis of creativity. Yet slowly, ever so slowly, the nature of business is changing. The need for innovation in business is gradually overtaking the need for control as the resource that makes the difference between success and failure.

Really? But isn't business essentially about control? Controlling resources and controlling people? Yes, but business is also about innovation and communication, both of which live at the heart of creativity.

There are two reasons why I believe creativity will become increasingly valued in business. Control is certainly critical in business, both resources and people need to be managed carefully. But control is easier to teach than innovation. Given an equal need for both innovation and control, control is the easier skill or talent to find and implement. Thus innovation rises in value because it's more difficult to find and utilize effectively.

Are innovation and control equal needs? They certainly haven't been in the past. Control has been the leading force in business since the beginning of

the industrial age. That age has ended however, and we now live in an service-based information world of commerce. This means the resource that needs to be controlled is more likely to be information rather than, say, coal. Information can be managed easily across electronic wiring and storage media. That means important work of business will be creating and disseminating information, and that requires a creative mind.

The other reason I believe creativity will rise in importance in business is that in our information-based economy, the resources required for business are fewer and less costly. If you can run a storefront on the Internet that can reach millions across the globe, you don't need capital to build a store that sits in a city and reaches thousands. The juice it takes to make the Internet company successful is not capital so much as the creative ability to reach and build a customer base over an infrastructure that's effectively free.

Napster was a wonderful example of this. A teenager was able to create a service that was quickly utilized by millions upon millions of users. Of

course Napster had a glaring flaw: the company was trading in products created by others, and trading without the consent of those who produced the products. But the heart of the matter is that someone without substantial resources could build a highly-used, well-recognized brand out of little more than a creative idea. Using the same infrastructure, surely someone will come up with another intriguing idea that will capture our imagination and a big audience, and it will probably happen soon. And the next wave of creative Internet entrepreneurs will have learned from the Internet crash and its aftermath.

The Internet isn't dead. It's just stumbling a bit while taking its toddler steps. Internet start-up ideas will continue to attract creative people, simply because the free infrastructure invites innovation and resists control. Control is the deathword to creativity. Creative people have shunned business for that reason alone. Yet in a world where creativity and innovation become the critical elements for success, you bet creative people will begin to see commerce as an avenue of expression.

During the high days of Internet exuberance, I used this column to make the claim that business will be the creative medium of the early 21st century. I still believe it's true, simply because the basic elements still exist a encourage a creative approach to business. The resources to support a new company do not require control so much as creative manipulation. Given this free and open canvas, creative people will rush in, despite the lingering notion that business is somehow anti-creative.

Rob Spiegel is the author of *Net Strategy* (Dearborn) and the upcoming *Shoestring Entrepreneur's Guide to Internet Start-ups* (St. Martin's Press). You can reach Rob at spiegelrob@aol.com

Profiting From The Ecommerce Website: Tips For The Beginner

By Robert Michael

The ecommerce website has taken the internet by storm. Consumers are buying billions of dollars in merchandise yearly, often even profiting more than offline stores. The internet has become one of the most prominent marketing opportunities ever, and the ecommerce website is a viable way to cash in on the craze. It is possible to profit from the ecommerce sensation. Your first step? Producing an ecommerce site that will always keep customers coming back for more.

Every website has a homepage. On your front page, it is a necessity to have an introduction that confirms the benefits of your ecommerce business and the top quality of all of the products you are selling. Visitors should be at ease shopping with you. Declare the goal of your website and state your business beliefs. You must convey that you have great respect for all those shopping at your ecommerce store, and let all potential customers know that every transaction is secure.

All customers love a good sale. It's a fact. Create a specific portion of your ecommerce site completely for sales and discounts. You may even need to design a different webpage if you have a large number of special offers and popular items, and then a separate page on your site itemizing all of your discounted goods. It is also a wise idea to have gift certificates available for purchase at specific times of the year.

Online shoppers want to visit a website with bold, readable fonts and a crisp design. Graphics should also load quickly; visitors don't want to wait around. An excellent ecommerce site always has clear navigation with large search boxes, and easily scannable categories. You must have a page somewhere on your site that addresses shipping and return policies. Always have a link that guides visitors to your privacy policy. This statement assures customers that you will never sell a third party the information that they have given to you. It is advisable to disclose this policy on the homepage of your ecommerce website.

Customers want their checkout experience to be three things when leaving an online store: fast, easy, and secure. It is essential that your shopping cart is only one click away from the final checkout. This process needs to be completed in the least amount of steps conceivable. A quality ecommerce website should offer a wide variation of payment options. Paypal and other electronic funds, credit and debit cards, online checks and money orders are just a few examples of sources that should be provided. Is your ecommerce shop furnished with a secure server? Let the shopper know. This will make them feel comfortable doing business with you, and most likely, they will keep returning to buy more.

Building and profiting from an ecommerce website is not the impossible dream. With knowledge and time, you can cash in on the newest internet sensation.

Robert Michael is a writer for Fyi

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links, resources and articles. For more information go to:

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