Making the Most of your Website: *A helpful checklist for success*

There's no getting around it. The Internet is a common tool for shopping research – research to compare prices and choices, research for store locations and hours, research for project ideas. Conducted before the sale, this research can in fact *lead to* the sale. Does your web presence help guide your customers to the sale? Does it guide customers to anything?

A website is basically your 24-hour marketing force. It's an online marketing brochure, providing information about your business – information that can convince customers to do business with you. Here's how you can make the most of your "brochure".

Start with the Basics

The key components for a website are basically the same whether you're a retailer or a manufacturer. You can add or subtract sections, based on your company's needs. Your website should have the following sections to effectively share essential information about your company:

- Your **homepage** should describe what kind of business you have, and your main target audience -- basically, what do you provide, and for whom? Your homepage can also list current specials, promotions, and/or product releases. The homepage is a crucial place to use keywords that people might type into search engines to find businesses like yours.

- "**About Us**" – this section should describe the history of your company, and name the key players. You can also include the company mission statement or main business goals. This page answers the question, "Who will I be doing business with?"

- **Products** – list the products (types and/or brands) you carry in your store, or the products you manufacture.

- **Classes/Events** – list your class descriptions, fees, and schedule. If you travel to teach classes at scrapbooking events, include an online itinerary, listing the dates and location names where you will be teaching.

- **Services** – list any special services you offer, such as color copies, layout scanning, or scrapping-for-hire, and rates for each service.

- **Location and Directions** – make it easy for people to find you. Give your full mailing address: street address, city, state, and zip code. You can offer brief driving directions from each direction or major highways, or just link to directions on Mapquest.com or Expedia.com.

- **Store hours** – provide store hours for every day of the week. Specify when you're closed, and when you stay open late.

- **Contact Us** – tell site visitors how to contact you. Provide your postal address, email address, phone and fax numbers.

Be a Resource

When you post informational resources on your website, you become a resource for information. Provide articles, how-to's, and message boards and your customers will know they can come to you when they have questions or need inspiration. These resources make your website "sticky", encouraging visitors to visit frequently and stay longer. Kate Griswold, web designer and owner of Kaleidoscope Concepts, suggests the following tools to provide additional resources on your business website:

- **Online store** -- add e-commerce/shopping cart functionality to allow visitors to purchase items from an online store. You must also have a secure, encrypted way to process payments.
- **Printable coupons** or coupon codes – make them available only at your website to encourage site traffic
- A **sign up mechanism for your email newsletter** (see the February 2007 issue of Memorytrends for more information on email newsletters.)
- **Newsletter Archives**, as a point of reference
- **Idea Gallery** of project examples (highlighting products you carry or produce)
- **Message Boards**/Forums to encourage a sense of community and belonging
- **Blog** – hosted on your website server, or link to a blog hosted offsite, like on Blogger.com or Typepad.com

Manufacturers' websites can make use of all the tools above, because they often get consumer/end-user traffic on their sites. But don't forget to cater to the needs of your "other" audience, too -- your retailer accounts. Griswold suggests that manufacturers include the following sections, to meet the needs of wholesale buyers:

- Information on opening a wholesale account – business requirements, minimum orders, who to contact, etc.
- a password-protected way to place wholesale orders online
- a downloadable PDF of your current catalog
- a list of local retailers that carry your products.

Spread the News

Another section to consider including is an online pressroom. This section, also called a Media Room, allows you to communicate exactly the message you want. On her website, whatsnextonline.com, publicist B.L. Ochman writes, "the Number One rule for developing an online Press Room is to think like a journalist. Think about the information that could be most helpful to someone writing a story about your company and then make it available."

- **The latest news.** Keep this updated, posting the most recent news first. Nothing is worse than finding an informational resource with press releases from 2005.
- **Backgrounders –** these one-to-two page documents provide background

information on your business, annual events, and VIPs. This is also known as a Corporate Profile.

- **Contacts:** PR contact information **-** name, email, and phone number

- **Images**: in both high and low/web resolution **--** logos, products, and VIPs

- **Audio and video clips.** "Definitely include multimedia. For extra punch, include a transcript for time-starved reporters."

- **Links to previous press coverage**

- Tipsheets

- **Customer and industry demographics –** often the media will work on a story on a general subject, like handmade crafts or digital scrapbooking, and industry statistics gathered in one place can be invaluable. See http://del.icio.us/ScrapbookingIndustry for a selection of informative links.

- **Suggested news/feature story angles**

- **Suggested interview questions or topics**

- **Offers of availability –** for example, clearly state that you are available for interviews and speaking engagements, and that tours and product/project samples are available for media review.

Think you don't need a pressroom? More and more, an online pressroom serves both the media, and customers looking for more information about your business. Looking at it that way, you might want to call this section your "News Room". The media will look there for current news releases, and customers won't feel intimidated because they aren't "press".

What's the Next Step?
For each section on your website, close your copy (text) with "the next step". That means that you tell your site visitors exactly what they need to do next, and how to do it. If you give your visitors a "call to action" (what to do) without informing them how to do it, you're missing a crucial step. For example, at the end of your Classes section, tell visitors to "Sign up for a class today by calling 555-1212 to reserve your spot!" In your News Room, tell the media "to schedule an interview or request product samples for review, email Susan at pr@ourcompany.com." On your Products page, let people know "if you want to learn how to use this tool, just stop by our store and ask for a hands-on demo!"

Providing detailed information and resources on your website is a service to both you and your customers. You're educating them on how to do business with you, but you come off as a "resource". Soon your customers will be spreading the word about your website, and your business.

Website Do's and Don't's

- DO keep your website updated. Fresh content makes people visit more frequently. Take old information off the site, or archive it.

- DO make your website easy to navigate. Essential information like location, contact information, and class schedules should be one click away from the homepage. "Remember," says Griswold, "pretty is nice - but functional is better."

- DO print your web address on EVERYTHING, advises Griswold – this means business cards, company stationary, email newsletters, email signatures, even in-store signage.
- DON'T use a flashy home page, or flash animation on an intro screen. That slows the customer from getting the information they want. And because there is little or next text, your search engine ranking may be adversely affected.
- DON'T making it hard for customers to find you. Post your address, telephone, business hours prominently. Include a link to driving directions.
- DON'T try to do it all on your own. Know when to delegate to staff and/or outsource to professionals.

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