



Joining the e-commerce Club by Chanon Collins

E-commerce, e-business, dot-com, and world wide web...these words have become house-hold terms commonly used in daily discourse. There are probably very few individuals who are not confronted with the prospect of exploring the Internet for some reason at some point in their daily activities. School children are becoming more versed in this world of electronic knowledge and are passing their skills on to their families. With a marketplace filled with knowledgeable and informed consumers, a business would be remiss if e-commerce were not an integrated part of its existence.

The world wide web can be a frightening place for those not comfortable with web design. This is the reason for the plethora of companies available to design, host, and maintain web sites. The choice is yours on farming out your web site design or pushing up your sleeves and sketching your home page. Whatever avenue you choose, there are elements that must be incorporated for your web site to serve as a successful business tool.

Your web site must have a purpose. Don't create a web site just to say you have one. You must give people a reason to visit your site on a regular basis. Consider your purpose in starting your business – if your business is a professional organization, your web site should, at a very minimum, inform your clients of your services.

Design your site so that it is easy to read and user-friendly. The point of e-commerce and gathering information via the Internet is ease in accessibility and instant response and gratification. If people must spend too much time scrolling down your page, they will abandon your site for one that offers information within a few clicks of a mouse.

If you have designed your site in such a way that visitors continue to return, you must maintain up-to-date content. There is nothing more disconcerting than a web site that boasts a "last updated" date of March 1999. As a contributor for the content on www.apbcpa.com, I had first-hand experience relating to the necessity for timely information. Consumers are interested in current, relevant information. Those browsing through your website are not interested in fluff. People want valuable information. Your website must be maintained on a regular basis to retain your customers and attract new clients.

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Interactive websites continue to top the chart for visits and customer retention. Imagine the number of hits www.amazon.com receives due to its promotional items and e-mail contacts. Thomas J. Leonard, author of Working Wisdom, has identified the top 10 features for a hot web site:

1. Register to receive something valuable.
2. Respond to your content/website.
3. Fill out an order form.
4. Perform a self-assessment.
5. Get access to a resource directory.
6. Take advantage of links.
7. Chat about topics that interest them.
8. Take advantage of interactive e-mail.
9. Enter a contest.
10. Explore site's artificial intelligence.

There are numerous places to begin with web site design. For those who are a bit leery of forging out into this new frontier, try visiting a site that will offer customized templates – www.intranets.com is a simple site that offers free hosting and design. It would be a good starting place for those wishing to explore the possibilities that the world wide web can offer to a business.

Business owners would be doing a disservice to their companies if they ignore this avenue for consumer information. Remember these words of wisdom – “Our doubts are traitors and make us lose the good we oft might win by fearing to attempt.” William Shakespeare

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