



Your competitors are ready for online sales. Are you?

by Rob Ierubino (M Prime Systems) © 2006 M Prime Systems

Way back in the 1990s, most people had to get in their car to travel from store to store in order to make a purchase of any consequence. Now, there's the web - the great equalizer.

Large company, small company, or individual: anyone can sell anything to anyone... and it's just sitting there... waiting for you to spend some of your hard-earned dollars. It's just a few clicks away. Unfortunately, so is the next store. So, it's up to you as the online vendor to make sure that the buyer stops into your store and the ever-elusive sale goes to your business.

If you build it they will come. Just because you've built a website, it doesn't mean that people are going to find you. Ask yourself: if you opened up a new brick-and-mortar store, how do you get people in the store to try it out? You certainly wouldn't just wait for people to drive by. You would be proactive. Public Relations, advertising and even just asking your friends to stop in – you would do anything to make that first sale, the second, the third, etc. You need to have the same mentality about your website. Don't be fooled that your product is any different just because it is sold online.

How do I spread the word about my website? Remember that the web is nothing more than a form of communication. Making a sale via the web is just like making a sale face-to-face. The more people you get to come into your store, the more opportunities there are to make a sale.

Put Yourself Out There. Wherever "there" is, be there. If someone is looking for the widget or service you sell, make sure that your potential customer has the opportunity to find you. Otherwise, how would they know that you exist? Is your product something that a certain group may find interesting? Then participate in their discussion group or blog. Is there a particular publication that your target audience reads? Get mentioned in that publication. Does your target audience shop at particular store or location? Cover the windshields with an inexpensive advertisement. Bottom line? Use everything you can to get notice and generate momentum.

Search Engine Optimization. Remember the Dewey Decimal System? Remember how you did research for school papers by going to the library, thumbing through the card catalog trying to find theme-related items? Think of search engines as the biggest card catalog system you've ever used. Search engines, like Google, allow people to not just search for specific words and/or phrases that describe a particular author or topic. They are capable of searching for what is of exact interest to them; from *nike shoes*, *broadway tickets*, *le bec-fin restaurant* and *Britney Spears* to *Brad Pitt*.

What product or service do you provide? Which words or phrases best describe them? Figure that out first – and be specific.

Having trouble defining keywords for your business? Get help from a reputable vendor that provides this service.

According to Marci De Vries, President - MDV Communications (www.mdvcommunications.com) "Think about those words or phrases that your customers would use to begin a search. It's important to be as specific as possible. If they find you when searching on *black Adidas running shoes*, they are more likely to buy those shoes from you than if they found your site when searching simply for *shoes*."

Absolutely, totally necessary: A Sitemap. If there is one thing that will make sure that your website is read by a search engine, it's a sitemap. As sitemap is exactly what it states – it helps visitors find there way through your website without having to navigate from page to page. For a search engine, this is your chance of identifying the critical information on your website. Google even provides a place for direct submission: www.google.com/webmasters/sitemaps.

Life's Little Example. As the father of an autistic child, I do a lot of research on "things" that would make my son's life easier. One of the quirks that my son has is being over-sensitive to sound. He is constantly walking around with his hands over his ears trying his hardest to control his surrounding elements. At the movies, grocery store, listening to music – doesn't matter, hands over his ears. We experimented with *earplugs* – too uncomfortable. So, I tried looking for *kids headphones*. No luck. Then, after watching the band Coldplay at the Live 8 concert last summer, the cameras panned to Gwyneth Paltrow and her daughter... wearing these bright pink headphones to block out the sound. What were they? Who makes them? Where did she get them? I needed to know! Then, a UK-based company finally posted on their website: "As worn by Gwyneth Paltrow's daughter at Live 8!" The Peltor Kid Ear Defender! This \$20 item was quite possibly the single best purchase I have made to help my son be a little more comfortable in his own skin.

What's the moral of the story? A small company ended up getting a surge of sales from around the world from one little picture. Why? They were smart enough to know the exact words people would use while searching. Be smart. Do what it takes to give your potential customers the opportunity to find you.