



GETTING NOTICED ON THE INTERNET - DIGITAL MARKETING FOR SMALL BUSINESS

The Internet has grown from a small network of academics needing a way to trade research into a world-spanning, ubiquitous marketplace and repository for nearly every possible kind of information and knowledge. How does a small business avoid being washed away in the constant tide of buying, selling and marketers hawking every conceivable item (and some difficult to conceive...)? The Internet provides advantages for both customer and proprietor in that one can search for exactly what is desired, without the bother of endless phone calls, driving to malls, or poring over mail-order catalogs. A quick keyword or 3, and hundreds of results vie for attention on the screen. Making sure your company is one of those results near the top is a combination of factors: specificity in product offerings, Search Engine Optimization of web content and linking to and from related topics and sites. The only way to get noticed on the Internet is to have a listing or presence, whether a dedicated website, ads on relevant sites, or by word-of-mouth. Oftentimes ads on online journals, informative sites, or e-zines (online magazines) are cheaper than space in a print publication, as well as being available to a wider audience than a dedicated website may be. Rates are often available for daily, weekly, or monthly terms, increasing flexibility and allowing a tight budget more leeway. Word-of-mouth advertising can be very cheap, but the returns may be difficult to quantify. Sponsoring web shows such as podcasts or webcasts can be a great and cheap way to gain word-of-mouth exposure. Many times, a podcaster will be so thrilled to gain sponsorship that rates can be negotiated for very little, but make sure to approach a podcaster that has a show related somehow to your business. Don't overlook resources like Google's Adwords either, as they can be slightly pricier than similar options like banner ads, but they are shown to be far more effective than pop-ups, banners, or pay-per-click ads due to their specific targeting. When a potential customer decides to look up a product that you sell, is he or she going to find your site or listing? Being specific in the terms used on your site or listing is key, as keywords are what drive the search engines like Google and Yahoo. If your company sells shoes, it's not enough to put the word "shoes" on your site--it has to be anticipatory to the searches that potential customers are doing. Most customers have an idea of what they are looking for when doing a search, so instead of "shoes," a customer will search for "imported Italian leather shoes." Specific focusing of terminology and product listings are involved in Search Engine Optimization (SEO), as SEO is driven by specific keywords and their repetition or location on a page. If the term "Italian Leather Shoes" is used 15 times on a website, it will pop up higher on the rating listings than one with the same words, but only as a page heading or title. It would be easy to go overboard on this if it were the only criteria, but it is only one of many different methods search engines use to list websites by relevance. Our article on Search Engine Optimization, located here, is a great reference to optimizing your site for maximum Search Engine Performance. With a clear idea of where you want to go with Internet marketing, it can be a valuable tool to expand your business into the digital realm, but be careful not to go overboard, as all marketing eventually crosses into the zone of limited return. Customers are looking for what they want--it's up to you to make sure they run into you, and the only way they will is for you to make sure your business is at the places they are going to go.

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