

Get clued-up about going online

UK consumers are enthusiastically embracing online sales, and retailers with stores and online facilities are doing better than online-only retailers. **Alex Greenland**, technical director, Cromwell Business Systems, describes what to look for in a web supplier when taking the plunge to go online.



Many retailers these days are contemplating having a website, including a high percentage of Cromwell customers. And the reason is clear – this sales channel is growing at a phenomenal rate. According to UK government statistics, over 38 million adults are internet users and 31 million bought or ordered goods or services online within the last 12 months. According to the latest forecasts from the IMRG Capgemini e-Retail Sales Index, this December £6.4 billion will be spent online, up from £5.5 billion in December 2009.

Most tellingly, online retail sales are growing at the expense of store sales and retailers with stores and online facilities (“multichannel”) are doing better than online-only retailers (“pure play”). IMRG Capgemini states that retailers with high-street shops experienced 18% sales growth between June and July this year. In comparison, the growth rate for online-only was just 8%.

The UK retail market as a whole is clearly moving in the direction of online sales, and that trend will continue as shoppers search for better value in tough economic times. So what else does a web presence bring you, other than the potential to take a share of the growing online sales pie?

Benefits of online presence

Well, an online presence means that you immediately appear to be a more substantial business than if you had retail stores alone – giving customers more confidence in dealing with you. It also means that customers can check on your inventory when it suits them and can buy from you even when your physical stores

are shut. They can opt in to marketing communications and promotions from you. They can obtain help with checking order status and with returns instead of contacting you by ‘phone or coming in-store. They can be incentivised to visit your stores for special events. You can track what they are doing on your site and tailor your offer to them more precisely. You can offer a range of delivery options, including reserve and collect. Plus, you can really differentiate yourself from your competitors by having a highly professional, effective and attractive site that customers enjoy visiting – over and over again.

That, of course, is the challenge – getting that highly professional, effective and attractive site that customers enjoy visiting. There are thousands of web companies out there, many with very good design skills. But I would urge you to look beyond the aesthetics of a website (important as they are) and to ask questions about whether those companies can offer a total service.

Issues to consider

When selecting a company to develop and support your website, you need to ask whether, like Cromwell, they can:

- ensure the website they develop will integrate fully with your EPOS system so you have only one database to manage;
- demonstrate sector knowledge e.g. understanding of requirements such as handling packages and claimbacks;
- prove they have the skills and a track record in developing sites for your specific type of business;
- provide a beautifully designed, easily

navigable and clearly differentiated website that really tells the market what is special about you;

- ensure the website looks good regardless of which browser the visitor is using, or whether they are using a PC, a Mac or a mobile device;
- optimise the website design and operation so it works incredibly fast and efficiently and you stand the best chance of converting browsing prospects into paying customers;
- provide essential extras such as Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) so that people can find your site amongst those of much bigger players;
- include a search facility so users can find specific content;
- deliver statistics and other analytical reports to show how your website is performing and what visitors are doing on it during their visit;
- develop a scalable website that will cope with increasing visitor numbers and multimedia content;
- assure you that, in the future, you can add in more sophistication such as different routing through the site for different types of visitors (for example, more personalised experiences for loyal customers than for first-time browsers);
- set up multiple distribution options for you, including reserve and collect.

So, the challenge is clear: make your physical stores exciting, informative and attractive spaces where customers will want to spend time – and do the same with your online store to give busy and cost-conscious consumers maximum choice. ■

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