Systems Clinic

Making your website work for you

Making your website a dynamic and customer-friendly shopping destination is a complex task requiring a lot of specialist knowledge and systems integration, advises **Sonu Kundi**, commercial director of Cromwell Business Systems.

The internet is an indispensable part of life for a very high percentage of the UK population. According to the Office for National Statistics, well over 80% (40 million people) are Internet users, and over 60% of the population use it on a daily basis. IMRG Capgemini figures show that over 37 million people shop online, making the UK the world's second largest e-commerce economy. A July 2011 study from The Co-operative Electrical found electrical goods sales is one of the fastest growing areas in internet retailing, increasing 996% since 2002 to a current value of over £4 billion a year.

All these stark statistics mean just one thing: any retailer in our sector still resisting going multichannel needs to reconsider. But setting up and maintaining a website is a significant (often underestimated) investment in terms of money and time, so where do you start?

First and foremost, you need a robust managed hosting environment. That means sufficient redundancy to guarantee the absolute minimum downtime on your website. It is an inescapable fact that online shopping is 24/7, with a large percentage of people happy to shop in the middle of the night. Plus, many of us have dismally low levels of tolerance for websites being slow or crashing in the middle of surfing or a transaction.

Consumers expect multimedia websites with fast-loading, high quality images and video content. At the most innovative end, some of our customers are building online communities, opening forums and portals, and providing RSS feeds – all designed to enrich the consumer's shopping experience. You also need a website that is scalable – not just for enhanced multimedia content but for increased visitor numbers. This all makes it more crucial than ever that your web solution is reliable and robust and delivers maximum uptime. For that, you need an IT supplier with the best possible managed hosting solutions and the capability to provide 24/7/365 support.

Once you have a sufficiently resilient hosting environment sorted, you can get to grips with the rather more interesting aspects of selling online – such as site design, navigation, content and internet marketing. Again, you need to carefully consider the type of company you appoint to handle all these diverse aspects. The ideal is a supplier able to integrate effectively, so you can link your web channel to your retail channel and, if you have them, mail order and insurance replacement channels as well. They should also be able to offer a total package of services designed to deliver the effective website you deserve, including: consistent branding; eye-catching design; clear navigation; informative, well-written content; search and/or sitemap facilities; cross browser and cross-platform compatibility; optimised images; statistics and analytics; search engine optimisation, pay-per-click advertising – and so on. Sound foundations are absolutely crucial. Of course, once your site is up and running, you must maintain it just as much as you do your physical stores: ensuring it is well stocked; clean and tidy; frequently refreshed; and a desirable destination that people want to visit many times.

So, to protect your online investment, your online brand and that vital online revenue, you need robust web infrastructure, guaranteed managed services and properly integrated IT from a solid provider; effective web development and design capabilities; and an ongoing management and maintenance plan. Sadly, if you ignore those essential elements you are all too likely to end up with the worst of all possible worlds: an expensive website that no-one wants to buy from. ∎