



EXPERT ARTICLE

Start Selling Online

By Bruce Townsend

With online spending growing at over 50 per cent year-on-year, it's hardly surprising that more and more companies are doing business online. In this article Bruce Townsend, marketing manager for retail technology specialist Actinic, provides some basic steps in setting up an online shop.

Stop and think

Think carefully about all aspects of the online shop – how it should look and work, and what your priorities are online. Consider your business values and how your proposition differs from your competitors, and make those things cornerstones of your online plan.

Think like an online customer

Don't just trust your own ideas - look at them from a customer's point of view. Use some popular online shops like Amazon and Tesco, and see how they work. Ask friends and family which are their favourites, and why. Make a list of the key principles that you want to follow.

Keep it simple

Amazon and Tesco can teach you a lot – but unfortunately, you probably won't have their online budget! The more complex your website, the more it will cost, and the longer it will take to start earning.

Start simple and generate some online revenue, then develop your ideas as you progress. A customised off-the-shelf ecommerce solution generally provides better value than a bespoke site.

Stay in control

Work to a plan, budget and timescale, and keep as much control as your knowledge allows. Keep ownership of your business data.

Online applications are growing in popularity, and have many advantages, but they leave your product, customer and order data on someone else's server. Choose a well-known provider, and make sure you can extract data for backup, and in case you change providers.

Function over form

Your website is a showcase for your products – not your designer's skills! Make sure the products shine through on every page. Ensure they are easy to find, pages load fast, and orders can be placed in three-four clicks. Provide a search facility, a 'breadcrumb trail' and a homepage

link on every page.

Design for search engines

Use a keyword research tool like Wordtracker (www.wordtracker.com) to find how people are searching for your products, and use the same phrases on your site. If you sell compact disks but most people search for 'CDs', then CDs is the word to use.

Divide the site into sections according to how people search. For example, set up sections by manufacturer, but also by product type, and display each product in both sections.

Think about how to get other sites to link to yours, because that will hugely influence your rankings. Provide useful, unique and relevant content that is worth linking to. Exchange links with other good quality, relevant sites – but don't buy or sell links.

Budget for marketing and PR

The best-looking and best-featured site in the world won't make any money if no one can find it. Search for links to your main competitors ('link:www.theiraddress.com' on Yahoo!) and target the same sites to promote your own.

Tell existing customers about your website. And test things like advertising and direct mail to attract visitors to your site.

Provide reassurance

Reassure visitors that their precious card details are safe with you. Provide full contact details including postal address (a legal requirement) and email.

Give your terms and conditions and returns policy, which must comply with the European Distance Selling Directive. Use SSL in your checkout. Legally, you must comply with the PCI DSS standard for credit and debit card processing.

Sell, sell, sell!

Provide a 'buy now' button wherever a product is mentioned, and put best sellers and offers on your home page. Make sure batteries can be ordered with any battery-powered product just by ticking a box. And use special offers and bundles such as 'three for two' to increase the value of each sale.

Delivery is key

Use a reliable carrier, and keep track of deliveries. Take responsibility for problems, and fix them quickly – the customers are yours, not your carrier's. State clearly where items are out of stock or made to order. Set realistic expectations, and aim to beat them.

www.actinic.co.uk