

Are You e-Ready?

David J. Skyrme suggests you have a rethink about your marketing and customer service.

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You may have launched your ecommerce web site and taken advantage of the advice given about technologies and methods covered in ecominfo.net. Does this mean that your own organization is ready for e commerce? My own experience suggests not. Just during the last few weeks as a user I have experienced:

- A site whose home page had a message that started 'Microsoft OLE DB Provider for ODBC Drivers error '80004005'
- A bad link from the front page
- No phone number to contact for product information
- One magazine subscription made online that vanished into thin air, yet while two customer service representatives (one by phone, one by email) were convincing me it had not been processed and I should pay again, the magazine started arriving!
- A promise of a 2-3 day delivery which two weeks later has still not arrived (and the web page still says 2-3 days)

- Emails to customer support that have taken 3-5 days to respond, and in one case not at all
- A site that rejected my registration since it did not recognize my (valid) post code.
- Several sites that repeatedly gave Javascript errors

I could go on, but you get the general idea. And in case you think that these are small businesses on their first forays onto the net, you're wrong. Most are large companies, supposedly web savvy, many of them household names. The point is that ecommerce is only as good as the capabilities behind it, and that means the whole of the organization, especially customer facing parts.

My experience as a marketer for over 20 years, and a web user for the last six, suggests that many traditional methods of marketing don't carry over well into the ecommerce environment.

What's The Same, What's Different?

Larry Ellison, the Chief Executive of Oracle, is often quoted as saying "the Internet changes everything". Don't this too literally. Even on the Internet the three Cs and 4Ps of traditional marketing apply:

- **Customers** - you must know their needs, expectations and what they feel about your products and services
- **Competitors** - you must know who they are; in an online environment they are often not who you think they are (try typing in some keywords related to your products and see what names pop up!)
- **Company** - you really must know your strengths and weaknesses, since on the web there are thousands, or even millions, of other companies doing similar things to yours
- **Product** - what will you offer online? Some or all of your portfolio? What can you deliver online?
- **Pricing** - know what your customers' value; remember that on the Internet they expect things to cost much less (if you don't price appropriately, they'll quickly find someone who does)
- **Place** - although the Internet provides one single place to do business globally, you may have to address specific trading laws, taxes and import procedures or restrict your geographic coverage.
- **Promotion** - the best thing you can do is to ditch all your glossy brochures and your existing marketing agency, and start from scratch with an Internet web perspective.

The other main thing that is not different is the overall marketing approach. You need to identify and target specific customer groups and individuals. You need to understand their intentions motivations, needs and level of spending authority. You need to guide them through a buying process that matches their needs with your products so that they can be more successful.

The main advantages of the Internet are 24-hour opening hours, access to more customers and reduced cost of sales. Put in place the right ecommerce platform and just sit back to and take orders. But first you do have to address the 10Ps of Internet marketing.

The 10 Ps of Internet marketing

Packaging - the Internet offers innovative ways of packaging information and services. For example on-line training is a fast growth area. For physical products, consider how to convey their characteristics virtually - can you use application notes or short video clips showing satisfied customers?

Positioning - how do you set yourself apart from the 100 million or so other web sites? Within a few seconds of glancing at your pages, the reader must clearly understand how your site can help them. Think first of compelling content that is useful rather than product promotion.

Portals and pathways - every industry or profession has its well known 'portal' sites or starting points. If you're not one of these, then make sure potential

customers can find you from them. Also use proven techniques to ensure that you come high up on search engine results.

Page impression - your pages must attract and retain attention and guide people easily through your site. The style must reinforce your positioning and branding. Too many sites are overloaded with irrelevant graphics at the expense of quality information.

Progression - it's difficult to sell a \$10,000 item directly from a web page (though not impossible!). Everyone expects something for nothing! So have a free offering, and then a range of products priced at \$10, \$100, \$1000 and so on. Buyers can progress, gaining familiarity and confidence as they go.

Payments - make it easy to do business with you. Use payment service providers to process credit card transactions within seconds. Spell out prices in US dollars and Euros.

Performance - measure the overall effectiveness of your e commerce site. Conduct random tests as a customer. Make sure your Internet service provider gives you regular analyses of uptime and usage e.g, number of visitors and user sessions, ranked lists of pages, users, and referrers (this shows how people reached your site). In particular, as my opening examples indicated, you must

measure how well your various functions perform in terms of responding to queries and achieving fulfillment.

Personalization - the Internet allows you to focus relatively cheaply on individuals. If you use 'cookies' (and have the relevant privacy statement and data protection compliance) you can personalize offers and send potential buyers email alerts when there are relevant offers of interest.

Psychology - understand the psychology of your web user. They are in a different buying mode than when they are face-to-face. Although there are many browsers, some are serious shoppers evaluating your products alongside others - and remember, they are only one click away!

Process - back to where we started. It's a sad fact that in the urge "to get on the web", most organizations seem to treat ecommerce as an add-on to their existing operations. If you think through carefully the new opportunities that the Internet creates, then you should completely rethink all your organizational processes. This, more than any other P, distinguishes the truly integrated e-business that will survive and thrive, rather than one that is dabbling with e-commerce ineffectively.

One final point, the great advantage of the Internet, is that a small company can be as good, if not better than a large one. As companies like Yahoo.com have

shown, a small one can quickly grow into a large profitable one through the Internet. See you online.

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About the Author

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