

19. Search Engines and Marketing Your Store

Getting Customers To Your Site

Creating and deploying your store is only half the challenge. You now need to get the customers to your store. There are several ways that customer can find your store on the Internet.

Domain names

One of the most important factors in attracting customers to your site is a domain name. A domain name is your own unique website address on the Internet. Your iNETstore web site usually has an address like www.mystore.com. This type of address is called a 'domain name'. Your web hosting company should be able to advise you on the processes involved and the costs of registering your own domain name.

Debate continues as to what constitutes a domain name that is easy to remember. Some people believe that industry specific domains are the easiest to remember (such as www.computers.com for a company that sells computers), whilst other people point out that some of the most well known brands on the Internet are not industry specific words at all, for example www.yahoo.com. For many existing companies this is not an issue. If your company name were "Acme Trading Ltd" then you would normally apply for the domain www.acmetrading.com or www.acme.com.

If you are trading in specific countries outside of the United States of American then you may also like to get the domain that is specific to the country that you are trading in. For example, the regional domain for Australian domains names is the extension 'au'. In the example above we may also like to register the domain www.acme.com.au. Of course, there is no guarantee that you will obtain your preferred domain name. Essentially domain name registrations are on a 'first in best dressed basis'. So if you have not already done so – register your domain name today!

Once you have a domain name you should list it on all advertising and promotion material as well as include it on all your business cards, stationary, and correspondence. You may also be able to have your domain name and e-mail address listed in the Yellow Pages or White Pages along with your normal telephone listing.

Mail outs to existing customers

If you already have an existing customer base you should do a mail out to all your customers advising them of your domain name. Your mail campaign may be a traditional print based campaign or increasingly companies are focussing on email-based promotional campaigns.

Email based campaigns have the advantages of very low costs of distribution and a very quick time to market. Note, however that the etiquette for email based campaigns differs from print based media.

It is important that you only send email to people who have willingly advised you of their contact details. Sending mass e-mails to unknown recipients (known as spamming) will not only be counter productive to your marketing efforts but may also breach the terms and conditions of your Internet Service Provider or Web Hosting Company, which can even result in your web site been closed down.

Search Engines

One of the most popular ways of finding websites is by searching the Internet using a search engine. Therefore it is essential that you get your site listed on all the major search engines and directories. All of the major search engines and directories have a link on their front page to a submission form where you enter the details of your site so that it can be listed on the search engine.

Submission is usually free, but it may take up to a month to see your site actually listed. It is important that you monitor the major search engines and directories to see the position of your website and to resubmit your site if necessary. This can be a time consuming process. Fortunately software packages have been created to make this process a lot easier. A popular software package for monitoring search engine positioning is WebPosition (<http://www.webposition.com>).

Popular Search Engines and Directories are:

Yahoo - <http://www.yahoo.com>
Google - <http://www.google.com>
Excite - <http://www.excite.com>
Hotbot - <http://www.hotbot.com>
AltaVista - <http://www.altavista.com>

MSN – <http://www.msn.com>
Looksmart – <http://www.looksmart.com>
Infoseek – <http://www.infoseek.com>
Go – <http://www.go.com>

Improving Search Engine Indexing

Because search engines are notoriously bad at indexing dynamic, database-generated pages, a special search-engine gateway page has been included with iNETstore 2003. The page is available if you go to <http://www.yourstore.com/catalogue/yourstore/se/>. A hidden link to this page can be found in the index page of your store. This will allow search engines to automatically pick up the /se/ directory and index your store.

Get Published

Notify related periodical publications (magazines) and other news sources (online and traditional media) of the launch of your site, if your lucky you can get an editorial section or review for free. Providing a pre-prepared press release may also help. Note that the mere launch of a web site is not normally considered 'news worthy' in itself. It is normally much more effective if you can include story about what makes your site significant or how it has effected your business.

WebRings

A webring is essentially a directory of numerous websites with a common theme, there is bound to be several webrings related to the type of products that you sell, getting your site included in these webrings is usually free but is often up to the moderator of the Webring. See <http://www.webring.com> for a list of Webrings.

Reciprocal Links

Quite often there will be major web sites that already exist that cover topics related to the type of product that you sell. Try approaching the developers of these sites and request that they link to your site in exchange for you creating a link to their site. A good way of finding related sites is to use the popular search engines listed above to find sites with the keywords that you compiled earlier.

Banner Exchanges

A banner exchange is a service that places a banner add (a rectangular image advertising your website) on other websites in exchange for you displaying other people's banners on your website. Most banner exchange programs are free, while some even pay you for the traffic and sales that come from your website.

Affiliate Programs

Affiliate programs are very effective forms of advertising. An affiliate program gives a financial incentive for other sites to link to your web site. The incentive is paid when a customer hyperlinks to your site from your affiliates web site and makes a purchase on your web site as a direct result. An affiliate system is built into iNETstore 2003. See chapter 14 for more information.

Online Advertising

Of course, there are also infinite ways in which you can pay to advertise your web site. Successful marketing campaigns have been conducted using both offline and online advertising media. Usually, however it is a combination of the two that strikes the right balance. As always, paid advertising is a case of test market, test market, and test market again.

Read

Admittedly this over view of marketing on the Internet is very brief. In the fast paced environment that the Internet is, it important to stay keep up to date with the latest trends and research. Web sites such as <http://www.iconocast.com> are valuable resources for this type of information.

Keeping Customers Coming Back

Now that a potential customer has found your online store, how do you get them to make a purchase and keep them coming back?

Customer Confidence

Unfortunately negative media coverage and misconceptions have caused considerable concern about the security and validity of online transactions. It is important to ensure that your customers are confident and know that their details are secure whilst using your store. Some methods of building customer confidence are:

- **Clear Policies:** Always have clear policies easily accessible on the front page of your online store. Refund, privacy, security and delivery policies are essential in ensuring customer confidence.
- **Contact Details:** Always provide some sort of company information and contact details on your site. At least an e-mail address and phone number. This will reassure customers that they can actually contact you should their order not appear. If your company is also a solid 'bricks and mortar' company then why not tell your customers about it on your web site.
- **Display a Security Logo:** iNETstore 2003 uses a 128 bit SSL payment gateway for accepting online payments. The issuer of this certificate is Thawte (www.thawte.com). Many customers are familiar with this authority and by displaying its' security logo you may increase a customers confidence in the security that your web site offers.
- **Join an Online Retailers Association:** Like traditional associations, members of online retailer associations are bound by the rules of the association. Displaying the logo of the association on your website reassures your customers that your online store meets the membership requirements of the association.

Opt In E-mail

One way of keeping potential customers coming back to your online store is to offer them the chance to sign up for free e-mail updates and newsletters, this way you can send out notifications of specials, new stock or price changes.

Competitions, Discussions and Information

One very reliable way of keeping customers coming back to your Online Store is to provide some sort of dynamic content, that is content that interests people but changes regularly. Regular competitions, discussion forums or product or industry related news and information are amongst the most effective content.