

# Lost Sales Found Here

## Why You Need a Website

by Megy Karydes



URLs. Blogs. Search Engine Optimization. Starting or managing a website isn't for the faint of heart. You can try to do it yourself, or you can hire someone else to build it for you. There are so many companies that provide turnkey solutions to developing and managing your website. No programming required. Domain names registered for you. Even marketing help if you need it. So why are so many retailers, reps, and manufacturers still without a website?

Ryp Walters, president and head bean of OverCoffee Productions (www.OverCoffee.com), one of the leading Web designs companies for the gift and home industry, cites three primary reasons why some still don't have a Web presence: cost, technophobia and time.

"Budgets are tight all around the industry," Walters admits. "And since websites fall in the marketing budget, there is a tendency to push it to 'next year.'"

Eric Dean, president of Whereoware (www.Whereoware.com), another Web design company that services the industry, agrees and adds, "While our industry certainly sets the standard for product innovation, from a business practices standpoint, it tends to lag other industries."

Both OverCoffee Productions and Whereoware have helped hundreds of websites for companies in the gift and home industry. However, what's changed in recent years is that companies had to be convinced they needed a Web presence to build their business. That's not the case anymore, as more executives and retail store owners are realizing that websites are increasingly turning into destinations for customers looking for a friendly, 24/7 place to get information, see product and do business, according to Dean.

John Toler, vice president of sales of Evergreen Enterprises, (www.MyEvergreen) a manufacturer of gift, home and garden items, launched their site this year after he and Dean spoke for years. "Our market was finally ready for an e-commerce type of site," Toler says. "Our retail customers still preferred our paper catalogs and meeting with our territory

managers until recently. However, as times change, we've made the decision to offer e-commerce capability to service the needs of our customers." Toler has been more than pleased with his return on investment.

Some others have taken a different, if not unorthodox, way to build their site. Kelly Weinberger, founder of WorldFinds (www.WorldFinds.com), which imports fairly traded gift and women's accessories, launched her site with her husband while traveling in Kathmandu, Nepal. "We were traveling and realized that we wanted to help the artisans we met during our trip by selling their handmade items to retailers in the United States," says Weinberger. "We decided not to wait until we returned from vacation, so my husband David and I went to a nearby cyber café in Kathmandu, registered our domain name, and built our first site in that very café. We went from idea to a website in a week."

That was November 1999. Today, Weinberger and her husband have almost 500 retailers as loyal customers and they make regular trips to Nepal, India, and Indonesia to work with their artisan partners. While their site isn't e-commerce based right now, they will be incorporating their accounting software in the coming months so they can allow their retailer customers the ability to place orders online securely and even download artisan stories.

### Not Being Online is a Costly Decision

What some people are realizing, quickly, is that not having a Web presence and an online strategy is now beginning to hurt their business as more and more tech-savvy individuals are expecting companies to be online.

For manufacturers and sales representatives, what's worked in the past isn't necessarily going to work in the future. "For a long time, the traditional methods of sales and service (going to market and relying on sales representatives and printed catalogs to get product information) worked very well [for manufacturers and representatives]," says Dean.



Clutch Accessories knew from the beginning that they wanted a website before they opened for business. Their site went live in August 2007.

Toler adds that while his retail customers still visit showrooms, meet with territory managers, and shop through the catalog, he's noticing a different type of retail customer is beginning to shop online. "We're seeing a significant amount of activity in the evening and weekends. Additionally, we've had orders coming in from Curaçao, the Virgin Islands and Dubai. Having an e-commerce site allows us to service our customers any time of the day, when it's convenient for them, not us."

Retailers aren't immune to losing business if they aren't online. Collectors Gallery has a retail store in Woodbury, Minnesota, but saw the potential the Internet could bring in 1996. "Whether it was simply to tell people who we are, where we are located or how to contact us, we knew that investing in a website would be beneficial to the business," says Kevin Hauge, marketing director for Collectors Gallery (www.CollectorsGallery.com). Hauge finds it hard to believe there are any businesses without an online presence, and he suspects lack of information and education on the subject to be the reasons.

While cost and timing are often the issues many insist are the reasons they're not online, it seems lack of

experience and familiarity is what really delays them from getting started. Unless you're very familiar with how a website works and how to properly promote it to generate necessary traffic, most don't even make it to second base because they don't know what to do.

Jonathon Gudai, vice president of business development for online stationery boutique, Storkie Express (www.StorkieExpress.com), didn't even consider building their own website when they launched in 1999. Today, one of the top baby-specific online boutiques around credits constant innovation as one of the keys to their success, but left the programming and backend technology to the experts. They chose OverCoffee Productions because Storkie Express felt it understood their needs and had the knowledge and experience to take them where they wanted to go.

Managing a website isn't just another part of your business, it is another business and should be treated as such in order to be successful. However, as more and more of your customers are checking the Web for products and updates, not having a website can actually cost you more in lost business than if you did have a functional website.