

Promoting Your New Site

You built it and they haven't come?

Try some old-fashioned promotion.

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By Dan Blacharski

Q: I have a great concept for a small e-commerce company and have created a very attractive Web site, but it doesn't seem to be attracting many visitors. I am having trouble figuring out how to get exposure. Can you help?

A: What we're talking about here is the old "build it and they will come" syndrome. Thousands of people have created wonderful Web sites with cute slogans and useful products for sale, only to have them languish in cyberspace, collecting virtual dust. In fact, building a Web site and hanging it out in cyberspace doesn't guarantee you an audience. Even though it's accessible, people have to know about it first before they can surf over to it. To be sure, a small number of people may just stumble across it, but the stumble factor alone won't generate enough traffic for you to turn a profit.

Even in a virtual business, you still need old-fashioned promotion to make people aware of what you have to offer. That's why during the height of the dotcom boom, some start-ups spent millions of dollars for a 30-second Super Bowl ad. In fact, the most successful e-commerce operators spend more on offline advertising than they do on online advertising. Here are a few ways to get people to come to your site:

- **Search engines.** The most common tactic e-commerce operators use to start their promotional campaign is registering with search engines. Unfortunately, too many operators suffer from the incorrect belief that this is going to generate a lot of traffic. It won't. However, it's quick, it's usually free, and it'll generate at least a little traffic—it's a good place to start, but don't stop there.
- **Internet malls.** The claim is that by placing your site in a virtual mall, you will automatically get a lot of traffic, just like a store in a physical mall gains traffic just by virtue of being there. There is some validity to this claim, but it depends on the mall. Before joining one, find out how much traffic it really has and how they promote their site. Take an informal survey of your friends and acquaintances to see if anyone has ever heard of it. If you join an obscure Internet mall, all you have is a bunch of stores that nobody has ever heard of and won't visit, instead of just one.
- **Repeat business.** Give customers and visitors an opportunity to "register" for a discount coupon, prize, informative newsletter or something else of value. Your "fine print" in the registration informs them that they may receive promotional messages. Once you have their e-mail addresses, you can send out periodic updates on products that may interest them and drive them back to the site.
- **Offline advertising.** Don't limit yourself to e-advertising, even though you have an e-business. Old-fashioned print, radio and TV are still some of the best ways to get the word out.
- **Public relations.** If your site is unique or newsworthy in some way, you can create a press release and see if any newspapers or magazines may carry a short piece or announcement about it. You may even consider offering to write a column or one-time article for a related publication, with the understanding that your bio (and a link to your URL) will appear at the bottom. For example, if you're selling some gizmo used in process manufacturing, write an article (or hire a professional PR writer to do it), and submit it to one of the dozens of manufacturing trade magazines that are in print.

The bottom line to this message is, even though you may have spent countless hours developing a clever Web site and may have lined up terrific products for sale, your work has only just begun.