

Small Businesses missing the Web

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USA Today has an article reporting the results of a Verizon survey on small business Web sites. Verizon found that 70% of small businesses don't have Web sites.

Many business owners don't have a site because they don't see any value to having one. Their product can't be sold online, so they won't directly increase revenues by having a site. Their business grows primarily through referrals, so a sales and marketing site seems pointless. Moreover, the business owners don't understand technology, so the process of creating a site seems a mystery to them.

I have yet to see a small business that doesn't stand to gain through a professional, well-planned Web site. A solid Web site that integrates into a small business's processes can increase customer satisfaction, reduce costs, and speed delivery times.

The article describes a company called Craftex Protective Coatings that makes custom industrial parts. Their sales are based completely on referrals from existing customers, and they don't feel their target customer would shop online. They don't have a Web site because they are looking at the Web as a shopping and marketing tool only, but with what little I know about this company, I can immediately see reasons why they need a Web site.

They make custom parts. It is likely that they need to keep their customers informed about the status of their orders and when the parts will arrive. The current process is either regular calls from the customer asking for updates, or someone calling the customer to tell them what's going on. Instead they could provide a Web site that allows customers to check the status of their order anytime without calling in. Status updates could be automatically emailed from the site.

There is probably a design and approval process involved in the creation of these custom parts. The customer tells Craftex what the part they need is supposed to do. From these requirements, Craftex drafts a design, which the customer approves. From there a prototype is built and approved by the customer. Finally, the part enters production.

The requirements and initial design can both be displayed and approved online through Craftex's Web site. Electronic documents that contain drawings, notes, and a description of the requirements can be stored online with revision control. As people make changes and add notes, previous versions of the documents are archived for future reference. Likewise, the part design probably starts out as a CAD drawing and can be exported to pictures, PDF, movies, and 3D virtual reality objects. These documents can also be placed online in a customer-only area of the Web site. These design documents can be viewed, revised, annotated and approved through the Web site. Turnaround times and costs are reduced by eliminating the need to send documents by courier and overnight mail. Customer satisfaction is increased by helping the customer informed throughout the process.

Even though all of the products sold by Craftex are custom, there are most likely reorders of previous parts for spares, repairs, and new machines. Customers can easily view the parts they have bought in the past and place new orders for these parts. Just because your product can't be inventoried doesn't mean it can't be sold online.

Since Craftex's business is entirely referral based, they don't see a need for sales and marketing information on their site. But once a customer has been referred, how do they contact Craftex? They may have lost their phone number, might want more information about the history of the company, or may need approval from management to use them. Managers might be interested in knowing more about Craftex's capabilities, who their customers are, and how long they've been in business. All of this information can be made available on their Web site.

Most small businesses can benefit from a quality Web site. All they need is someone to look at their company and craft a Web strategy for them. Someone to find ways to use the Web to make their business run more smoothly, more efficiently, and with higher customer satisfaction. Small businesses generally don't have, can't afford, and don't need an employee dedicated to their Web site. Outsourcing this function to a trusted consultant or Web development shop can give them expertise when they need it at a fraction of the cost of a full-time employee.