CRITERIA FOR DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

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ABSTRACT

The Internet is no longer simply a medium or channel of our communication. It has become central to our every day life. Surfing the Internet and making purchases online is considered ordinary. Research indicates that 2007 online retailing will hit $259 billion, an 18% increase over 2006, and predicts that 10% of all apparel sales in 2007 will take place online [1]. The Internet offers consumers the opportunity to window-shop from the comfort of their homes, exposing them to multitude of choices in products that span the globe. As a result developing an organization's website is an important factor in attracting the customers and providing products and services that they want. This paper will address some of the important factors in developing successful websites.

INTRODUCTION

Compared to some other traditional methods, it is relatively easy and inexpensive to set up a retail store website; however, simply building a website does not guarantee sales [2]. Websites must entice Internet users to visit the site with well coordinated and appealing design, but the site must also incorporate and convey certain features, such as security and trust, in order to get the user to purchase from the site thereby converting the user to a customer. Many corporations believe that there is a lot of money to be made through websites. Amazon invested $400 million in marketing and technology in 2004, generating $477 million in free cash, but not all companies that put money into their websites reap the benefits [3]. It is the purpose of this paper to uncover certain user interface design elements that companies should incorporate to increase traffic to their websites and increase their online retail revenues.

DESIGN FEATURES INFLUENCING RETAIL STORE'S TRAFFIC AND SALES

Not to underestimate the impact of website design for retail store on its sales, consider the statistics that indicates year after year, there has been nearly a 50% increase in those consumers who report that a frustrating online experience would decrease their purchases at that retailer's physical store. Moreover about 82% of consumers say that frustrating online shopping experience would make them less likely to return to a retailer's website at all [4]. The numbers speak for themselves: launching a deficient design can be a waste of resources given that it will most likely fail to attract or retain customers. The challenge here is that the look and feel of an e-commerce website must be fully consistent with customer needs. We have identified seven characteristics of an effective website. Each characteristic will also examine specific user interface design elements and their influence on a retailer's website traffic and sales.

Online shopping to mirror offline

An effective website must mimic qualities of a bricks-and-mortar store to narrow down the gap between offline and online experience. Although when shopping online, consumers are limited to 2-dimential view of a product, it would be rash to think that online retail store environment has no equivalents to the offline store. Although the recent advances in the use of technology such as 3D features which allow the customer to try clothes and coordinate garments improves the online experience to overcome the lack of "touchy feely" ability of shopping online and the in ability to try on merchandise some retailers such as

Lands End have introduced an interactive personnel model which permits shoppers to see how a particular fashion will look on [5].

Service Quality

A website can serve as a tool for retailer to support stupendous service-driven relationships of their physical stores. A website design must portray excellent service and quality. This is significant marketing element for consumers when they shop online. Factors driving customer satisfaction, website traffic, and sales are responsiveness, credibility, ease of use, reliability and convenience. Websites that portray high service qualities have real-time customer service, help button, merchandise return process, fast execution of transactions, and tracking order mechanism [6, 7].

Attitudes and Behavior

Customers' attitude towards a website is critical to their intent to purchase from it or come back to it [6]. Retailers must create an online shopping experience relevant to their target market. Any retailer website must not discount the sophistication of its target market. Website design should go hand-in-hand with marketing to identify the store's low-involvement and high-involvement shoppers. For instance, low-involvement shoppers rate those websites favorably which are entertaining to them. However, high-involvement shoppers seek more up-to-date information [5]. Factors affecting attitude toward a website include ease of use, product information, entertainment, trust, and currency of its content[7].

Trust

According to the research done by Tsai-Shin Fong, "A well-designed website can help close a sale, can help persuade a consumer that this is the place and this is the time to buy." [5] To persuade a consumer to take the plunge and purchase a product from a website goes back to commercial tactics that are central to traditional advertising strategies. Fong refers to one of the key elements in developing a successful website as ethos, which incorporates characteristics such as recognizability, compatibility, assurance and reliability. In other words, the credibility of the website and the business it represents is essential to gain a customer's trust, which in turn is essential to increasing a consumer's intention towards purchasing.

Appearance

In the last six years, Internet retailing has had a huge impact on the retail sector, dramatically changing the way consumers shop for and purchase products. To remain competitive in the ever-evolving retail industry, traditional bricks-and-mortar stores as well as purely online vendors must devote much time and effort in making sure that their online presence through the face of their website makes a good first impression. In traditional stores the appearance of the store, the merchandise, and the outlay of the store can greatly impact the shopper's experience and impression of the store, which ultimately impacts whether or not he or she will buy from the vendor. Similar to the bricks-and-mortars stores, online vendors must also be conscious of such things as the design, layout, and the images of their website as appearance continues to have an impact on shopping behavior [5].

Navigation Ease

While the appearance of a website is important to attracting consumers and providing them with an enjoyable experience to induce the act of purchasing from the website, the ease with which a consumer can navigate through a website, also known as usability, is crucial in creating an effective website; that being a website that entices consumers to make a purchase. Peter Koeppel in his article, *Keys to an Effective and Profitable Website*, states that "usability is more important than aesthetics [8]. If a web site

looks beautiful but doesn't convert prospects into buyers, then it's not an effective web site…. [A] site needs to engage the target consumers so they can interact with the site almost effortlessly. When that occurs, consumers will have a better feeling about a product, service or brand, which will lead to a higher conversion rate [6].

Delivering on Promises

Although online retailers should create an atmosphere where customers spend more time online, the moment of truth comes when it's time to make a purchase. Chiagouris and Long suggest that "swiftly and accurately fulfilling orders and keeping consumers' information private are some of the key elements for which shoppers look"[5]. Similar to a traditional bricks-and-mortar business, the reputation of a company that has an online presence greatly depends on the consumer's perception of the reliability of a company. Reliability can be conveyed to consumers through trust building features as discussed previously, as well as providing consumers with prompt and accurate delivery of purchased products.

CONCLUSION

The Internet has proven to be a formidable and legitimate forum through which to conduct business. In this day and age, a business without a website will find itself in a serious disadvantage. Although sales through online retailers have increased in the last decade, they still only account for a fraction of total retail sales, signaling that companies have a long way to go before realizing the true power and potential of the internet. It is not good enough, however, to simply post a series of images and words to attract and retain consumers to one's website is not sufficient at all. There is a criteria for building a successful website that not only gets people attention but also convert them to customers. This paper has identified and discussed seven most important factors in designing and developing a successful website.

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