Title:
If You Build It, Will They Come?

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Summary:
QUESTION:
I recently launched a website for my sporting goods business. Do I need to do anything special to attract customers to my website? I know nothing about search engines and marketing as such. Please tell me where to begin. -- Sean M.

ANSWER:
Sean, that is a question that has been asked by every business person who has ever launched a website. If I build it, will they come? Of course they will -- if you've built a website that appeals to dead baseball players.

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ANSWER:
Sean, that is a question that has been asked by every business person who has ever launched a website. If I build it, will they come? Of course they will -- if you've built a website that appeals to dead baseball players.

For those of you who didn't get the "Field of Dreams" reference, let me put it this way: No, Sean, if you build it they will not come, at least not without some effort on your part.

Assuming that a website will automatically attract customers is the single biggest mistake that many business owners make. It is this mistake that eventually leads them to dismiss their website as a failure and abandon their online sales efforts.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard a client say, "Well, I threw up a website, but nobody ever came to it and I didn't sell a single thing from it! Dang thing was a waste of time, if you ask me …"

Forgive me, but "threw up" is the operative term there. These short-sighted entrepreneurs (God love them) mistakenly think that all they have to do is throw up a website and that their business will automatically double overnight. And when nothing happens they blame it on the infallibility of the Internet, on El Nino, on the Bosa Nova, on their customers… everything but their own lack of marketing efforts.

If you build it, will they come? That, Sean, depends totally on you.

When it comes to attracting customers, opening an online business (or an online branch of an existing business) is no different from opening a traditional brick and mortar shop. Without a little fanfare and a well-devised marketing plan, chances are your website will become just another spot of roadkill on the Information Superhighway.

The first step in devising your marketing plan is to ask yourself this question: Who is my customer? Who is it that I want to attract to my website? Believe it or not, this is a question many entrepreneurs fail to ask. The identity of your customer is incredibly important because if you don't know who your customer is, how can you expect to market to them?

The next question concerns the locality of your customer. Do you want to attract a local or global clientele to your website? If the answer is local, then you will gear your marketing efforts toward customers in your own backyard, which means incorporating your website launch with your offline marketing efforts.

If the website is the online branch of a brick and mortar business, include the website URL in all your print materials and advertising campaigns. Consider running ads in the local paper, on radio or TV announcing the launch of your site. Use direct mail or in-store posters to announce the site launch to your existing customer base. In short, keep doing what you're doing to attract customers to your physical store, just add your website address to the mix.

Just remember, it's important to consider your website a branch of your brick and mortar business because that's exactly what it is. A good business website will help you sell more products, widen your range of clientele, and increase your revenue without adding overhead. Don't sell your website short. Make it work for you.

If you are seeking a global audience, your marketing efforts will be quite different. Attracting customers from around the world is a more difficult task than attracting customers from around the block. Fortunately, the task is not impossible. The Internet has leveled the playing field in many ways. Now every business, no matter how large or small, has the ability to do business internationally.

In the most basic sense, an online marketing campaign to attract global customers should include the following efforts.

Register With Search Engines

There's not enough room in this newspaper for a thorough discussion of search engines and their effectiveness (or lack thereof) in driving traffic to a website. Suffice it to say that 95% of search engine traffic comes from Google and Yahoo, so start there. It's also important to realize that just registering with search engines does not guarantee you traffic, but it certainly can't hurt.

Unfortunately, the free search engine lunch ran out a couple of years ago when search engines figured out that people would actually pay for listings and higher placement. Since that time the only way to guarantee a high (or at least higher than others) ranking is to pay for it. The two most popular pay-for-placement programs are Yahoo's "Yahoo Express" and Google's "Adwords." Visit their respective websites for details on these programs. Be prepared to spend several hundred dollars at a minimum to get your site listed.

Exchange Links With Similar Sites

One free – and potentially effective - way to drive customers to your website is through link exchanges with sites of similar interest. Locate sites that make a good match to your own and contact the owner to ask if they will link to your site in exchange for you linking to theirs. If you sell golf balls on your website, set up a link exchange with another website that sells golf clubs. You post a link to them and they post a link to you. It's called digital back scratching, and if done properly, can work well to drive traffic your way.

Go To Where The Customers Are

If the mountain won't come to Mohammed, then Mohammed must go to the mountain. One little known way to attract customers to your website is to market your products on a mega-site like eBay. There are thousands and thousands of people on eBay at any given time and each one is potentially your customer, so it's a

great place to drum up business. Your goal is not to make a living selling on eBay, but to use eBay as a marketing tool to drive traffic back to your website. Go to where the customers are, then bring them back home with you.

Let's use our golf ball example. Post a few auctions on eBay selling your golf balls at a ridiculously low price so your auction attracts plenty of attention. When customers make a purchase, add them to your client list and send them an email inviting them to visit your website for more great products. eBay also lets you create your own "About Me" page that you can use to advertise your business.

We have just scratched the surface, but hopefully this is enough to get you started. I wish I could tell you that attracting customers to your website is easy, but the truth is, it's anything but. It takes hard work, creativity and above all, perseverance.