Selling Online

If you're considering selling online, remember that a user-friendly site helps you get repeat visits.

You may be interested in some basic dos and don'ts for online sales...

Do your background reading

Research your target, ensure there is a niche in the market for your business and formulate a business plan before you take the final step of selling online. Check that shipping and handling costs are feasible within your budget.

Do make special offers

Encourage visitors to return with promotional offers. Display them clearly on your site. Keep track of competitor offers for the purpose of comparison, and to get ideas.

Do make your site attractive

The quality of your photography, description of your products and the relevance of your content should all be priorities. But... strike the right balance between appearance and functionality. Few users have the patience to wait while large images download.

Don't keep your visitors waiting

Hi-resolution pictures and Flash usage can leave your customer waiting for the page they want. They will get bored of this, and are unlikely to come back.

Do keep clear communication channels

Customers should be able to email you with enquiries and problems, and expect a quick, professional response. A "Contact Us" function is particularly useful for meeting this need.

Don't expose your customers' data

Your customers will be paying by credit card. To secure your site, you will need to get a secure sockets layer (to scramble and encrypt sensitive credit card information). You will also need a privacy policy to reassure your customers that their data is safe. Alternatively, pick a hosting company that will handle your technical security.

Don't get complacent

Keep track of your competitors, their services and their site development. You can learn from their mistakes and successes, and perhaps pick up some tips.

Do advertise

You will need a marketing strategy to drive traffic to your website.

Do maintain your site

Regular updates - of products, offers and information – keeps regular traffic to the site flowing.

Don't forget your number

You may miss out on customers who dislike online payments. Display a number on each page so orders can be placed by telephone.

What should I consider before selling online?

Plan carefully before taking your company online – there are a number of practical concerns to consider. To assess whether your business is really ready to go online, think about the following issues:

Will the Internet enhance your Unique Selling Points?

Emphasise your unique selling points with attractive pictures, copy and testimonials on your site. If you have the facility to offer different delivery options, out of hours delivery and 24 hour availability, the Internet is the place to promote it.

A word of warning: if your offer compares poorly on price, Internet trading might not be for you. The ease of comparing products across websites means online shoppers are particularly price-savvy.

Have you the time to manage an online platform?

Making your site attractive and easy to use gives you a real edge over competitors. At the very least, customers will only return if you regularly update your site, provide simple navigation, clear costing information, and up to the minute info on your product or service – all of which is takes time.

Often, companies are slow to return to customer emails. This can be particularly difficult for small businesses if they have limited manpower and financial resources. Nevertheless it is essential for the success of your business, if you are to maximise sales opportunities. Remember, too, that customers can get online at any hour in full expectation of a fast service. An automated email response may help, alerting customers that their query is being processed. A list of frequently asked questions is also a sensible measure.

Can you calm customers' fears?

Online trade depends on the use of credit cards. You need to convey strongly the security of your site and payment policies, as data theft is a concern for many consumers.

You will also need to draw up a refunds policy for display on your website. Online shoppers are reluctant to buy without reassurance they can return damaged or faulty items.

What will taking your business online cost?

In addition to website design and maintenance, you need to consider connectivity charges, transaction fees, and advertising costs.

Can your business cope worldwide?

Consider whether you can deliver on a national scale, and beyond that an international scale. If you face a surge in demand, can you keep up? You may need to outsource some of your business and will certainly need to keep on top of inventory and stock levels.