

Top 10 Tips for Retail Websites

By Alan Cox of www.leftclick.com

With the new financial year upon us it's time to dust the marketing plan and crank the business engine for 2008/9. If your goal is to grow your business, then knowing and offering your customers what they really want will be your top priority. To show your competition who's the real market leader, it's time to act smarter, convert more visitors into customers and increase sales results with a truly customer-centric website - filled with attractive promotions and fresh ideas.

To learn from the best and most successful, here are 10 proven e-tail tips that have helped leading retailers to make giant leaps with their online sales:

1. Set some specific goals. These can be soft like "grow 50% this year", or ambitious like "dominate my industry online". As online markets mature, a leader emerges in each sector and a handful of smaller niche players. Think Amazon or TradeMe. You need to choose between being the leader or eating leftovers. Set some Key Performance Indicators and review them every week. Good KPIs to start with are:
 - Unique visitors
 - Conversion rate – the percentage who buy
 - Bounce rate – the visitors who see one page then quit
2. Use your visitor knowledge more intelligently. You know he looked at Indy music before, so when he comes back to your site, fill the page with relevant content, as he's unlikely to be interested in that limited edition Uliia CD. Also, you know that she has that designer handbag in her wish list; send her an email a week later with some specials and make sure her bag is in the list! Limited time only! There's thousands of ways to be creative with this knowledge and get more people to buy.
3. Pay for more prospects. If you are not already using Google AdWords to get prospects, then you should. You pay a few cents a time for qualified leads. Simple. If you're already using AdWords then analyse your campaigns: make sure the leads you're paying for are worthwhile, ditch the campaigns that are not getting a good return, experiment with some new campaigns and invest more and more in the campaigns that send you prospects that convert.
4. Get more FREE traffic from search engine optimisation (SEO). Get on page one of Google and get more free traffic. Working your way up the Google rankings needs sustained effort, not a one-off blitz. Try creating more landing experiences that target 'long tail' search phrases that are more likely to attract qualified prospects.

5. Make sure you give your prospects an easy journey. You have just paid to get a visitor to your site – don't just dump her on the home page and hope she finds what she wants. A page with dozen's of links and promos is really playing a lottery. Each page needs clear simple pathways to product with minimal 'noise'. Take a look at Amazon.co.uk which has very clear pathways and a good level of promotion, compared to dicksmith.co.nz which has simply too much clutter and fighting content.
6. Visitors like FREE. Can you offer anything for FREE? Free delivery, free tie with every shirt, free socks with shoes. And it's not just physical products – how about a free will for every new bank customer? Free training when you buy a new building product? Free is a magic word.
7. Provide an awesome on-site search feature. Try out the search facility on your site – you may get a nasty shock. A decent on-site search should always try and find something for the visitor. Misspellings should be handled gracefully, as well as synonyms. Search should handle the visitor's own words – not your jargon. Could your search present some 'best bets' or 'most popular' for your customers when they do a search? A great on-site search can act as a virtual assistant and get you more sales.
8. Get visitors to return and buy. It's cheaper to market to people you already know about than getting new customers all the time. Think of a good excuse to remind a customer that you are still around and have some very special deals for her. Easter Sale this week. Or something on her favourites list on special – just for today. Bought a gift? Maybe a reminder 11 months later would be timely.
9. Test your site with some real prospects. Testing with work colleagues, family or friends may make you feel warm and fuzzy but it really does you no good at all. Testing with people who fit your customer profile shows you how your site really works for these people and gives you the opportunity to find out how they shop online and what's really needed to convert them into customers.
10. Test, measure, and improve. Use A/B split testing to try alternatives and see what work best. The alternative could be a different offer – or a different page layout – or a different graphic or different wording.

The secret to meeting any of these goals is to break each one into small steps. Do something each week. Make a list and keep a log of what works best. Build on success.

FREE BONUS TIP: if you are already looking at your website numbers then you are already in the top 50% of website owners. Move further ahead by looking at a brand new statistic, something you have never measured before, each month. What days are best? What times? Are visitors at home or at work? Overseas? Do your visitors use broadband – or dial-up? Then take action based on what you find. DO IT NOW!

Alan Cox is the founder of LeftClick Ltd, New Zealand's only company specialising in achieving more leads and sales from e-business and e-commerce websites. Alan has been practising customer-centric design for well over a decade.

His no-nonsense approach to website optimisation has resulted in staggering increases in conversion rates and award wins with some of the big names in internet retailing both here in New Zealand and overseas.

By using various analytical methods to examine how people engage online LeftClick increases the quality and quantity of website visits and convert more of these visits into sales and enquiries. LeftClick also uses a range of tools, testing and optimisation methods to improve website conversion performance.

Alan's underlying passion is in simplicity in design, with a special interest in online customer behaviour. His goals are to build a successful and highly respected company with a great team and a fun and vibrant place to work.

Outside of work, Alan is a father of three, a keen cyclist, loves good coffee and has trained in barista skills. You can email him at alan@leftclick.com.