

## What is E-Commerce?

E-Commerce is a broad and general term for any business conducted online. Most people immediately think of the big names we come across every day on the net, such as Amazon, I-Tunes or Tesco. Those are indeed successful businesses conducting millions of pounds of business every year but think laterally; there are many more businesses that could get a slice of the action.



Small and Medium sized enterprises (SMEs) still have to compete with the 'big fish' wherever and whenever possible. The right technology and expertise can be the difference between not only a thriving business online and a thriving business overall.

For many organizations, E-Commerce seems like a costly proposition. Lack of good advice and information make the area even more daunting to SMEs with limited expertise and budgets. There are so many areas to consider when embarking on developing an E-Commerce site that it can be overwhelming; where do you begin?

### Think Outside the Box

E-Commerce is not simply the exchange of goods and money. What about information, expertise, service and experience? Forums, blogs and directories are the basis of E-Commerce for many service-based businesses.

Business to business (B2B) and business to consumer (B2C) markets need different E-Commerce approaches; in the B2B market you might want to provide quotations, enquiries or call backs online to put you ahead of your competitors in terms of response time and efficiency. For a consumer market the priorities may well be different again, so always remember to whom you are selling.

For example, manufacturing businesses, charities and others use intra and extranets to allow staff, customers and suppliers to share pricing and supply information, place and track orders or invoices, look at work in progress and deadlines, delivery dates and more.

These are excellent, cost effective ways of creating and sustaining customer, staff and supplier relationships and building loyalty. They make people's jobs easier and also add value to what your company can offer and improve your levels of service and cycle times. Happy customers make happy businesses – and more money.



For organizations with a more classic consumer model, direct communication with users or customers is what marketing, sales and customer service professionals have dreamed of for years. Here it is – on our doorsteps. Not only in terms of immediate offers based on stock levels, new products, 'bin ends', buy one get one

free, percentage discounts and other possibilities but also in terms of the immediate 'bounce back' email offers that are possible; integration with your 'call centre' – whether that's just you on the phone or a team of people.

Then there is SMS text marketing to peoples' mobiles, email offers, viral campaigns and more. E-Commerce is rich with possibilities and, best of all, they cost very little once the infrastructure is in place. Just compare the costs of 10,000 emails with 10,000 direct mail packs and you begin to get the idea. The Internet and E-Commerce are made for SMEs.

So a relatively small spend can lead to big results, the results you want at the right times for your business. Never before has a tailor-made marketing solution been easier to achieve.

### Nuts and Bolts



Now we understand the need for and potential uses of E-Commerce for different businesses, but how do you actually get started?

Technology and knowledge of search engines are crucial. A site may look pretty and have all the flash animation you ever wanted but if it can't be found easily or it 'falls over' or loses a user's order information they won't come back – and what's more they might just tell their friends.

Design is important, people buy with their eyes; but even more important to continued success are robust, secure platforms that make life easy for the user and give them peace of mind, whether that's a secure socket layer (padlock symbol) for payment or well moderated forums. Retail is detail and attention to that detail, along with safety and respect for users' information is vital.

There are thousands of software packages available which allow you to run an intranet, extranet, forum, shopping cart, directory or content management system. Take advice and choose the best one for your needs carefully; again, the shop window may look stunning but if the trolley has a wobbly wheel, you are undermining it straight away.

In addition, do not forget analysis; easy analysis of site traffic and statistics is crucial. The beauty of E-Commerce is the ease with which you can see what is working and what is not - instantly. If users are unable to place orders you can spot and remedy the problem fast, or, if traffic is not moving through the site – why not? Could through-flow of traffic be improved by better design or description?



Remember – function and purpose drive good design, not the other way around. Visitors will keep coming back because of price, products and service, not a flashy site that does not do what the customer needs.

## **There's No Map of the Net**

You will not get any business if you cannot be found – no matter how clever your site infrastructure. So, how do you go about letting people know about your online presence?

This is where search engine marketing appears. You want to ensure you get the right traffic to your site.



That means knowing the keywords and phrases the public really use to find sites such as yours – not just what you think they use. For search engine optimisation (SEO) to work, you have to be sure you are thinking in the same way as your customers. It is not uncommon for businesses to assume they understand the reasons their customers are visiting them when often this isn't the reality. Customers

are complex creatures and keyword research, effective copywriting and an understanding of what the search engines require are essential aspects of any successful E-Commerce site.

Other forms of search engine marketing such as Pay per Click (PPC) advertising are also well worth considering. The clear understanding of your target market built up in the keywords and phrases research for SEO is crucial here. Targeting your audience, even to a minor degree is always better than crossing your fingers and hoping for the best.

Think about it – it's no good having the biggest store, with the widest range and the best staff if you don't put a sign above the door.