

# THE RETAIL MANAGEMENT ADVISORS

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## TIPS FOR YOUR WEBSITE

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This month I asked my assistant, who does not have a retail background (but who does shop and use the Internet) to review a number of retail web sites, from our web site's LINKS page. Following are her observations:

A website can reach many people at *any* time of day or night answering questions, enticing shoppers and making your store the place to be. Website design is a personal and artistic preference but must be designed with the main goal of impressing your customer. To be a successful retailer, you have to know your customer and market to your customer. In web design, flashy use of color and movement usually appeals to the younger set when a more direct approach is favored for the fifty-something-plus customers. The following is a short list of **observations and ideas** gathered over the past few of weeks inspecting various retail sites.

### SITE OVERVIEW

The name and/or logo of the store should appear prominently on every page. It need not say Jones & Sons, Inc d/b/a John J Jones Shoes. If your customers recognize *Jones Shoes* inscribed over a man's loafer, that is what they should see on your website. Every site should have the store's physical address, directions or a map, phone number and a sign up for email. Since you are in the business of selling merchandise, images are good and necessary.

A "merchandise" carried or "brands" page, events page, and store history are nice and certainly give the customer an introduction to your business.

The time to consider maintenance cost and effort is during in the design phase. How often will you update your site? Who will do the maintenance work and updates? How much will it cost?

### PAGE LAYOUT

Put the name and/or logo of your store where it is prominently displayed on every page. Everything should be to draw in *your customer*. You know what your store has and you are in the business of selling. Market to your customers. No matter how good your web designer is, this is not a feature for their programming excellence; it is all about your customer and your potential customers.

Knowing your customer is vital. If you market to the bi-focal crowd, use white or light colored backgrounds with a fairly large font. A potential customer won't stay long on your site if they have to go find their readers first. On the other hand, if you market to young professionals, movement is good but no music or sound effects, please. I have it on good authority that that catchy tune is a "real bummer" when it explodes from the office computer.

Discussions with self-professed web-shopping mavens reveal the old adage is true: a picture is worth a thousand words. What does it look like? Where is it? What colors does it come in? A good

picture of the store is an excellent incentive to visit the store. Make sure the lighting is complimentary and the picture is clear. If your store front looks best as the sun sinks slowly below the horizon, then use that image. However, do not use low lighting on your merchandise. Those nice soft lights may flatter skin tones and imperfect figures but it may cause those lovely silk blouses to appear dingy.

#### FONT & BACKGROUNDS

Several websites I reviewed used a tiny font to compliment large images. While images are important, in some cases the text was nearly impossible to read. In one case, the links were so small they were difficult to click on. Also, while thousands of different fonts are available, not every font reads well. Keep it simple. Looks at what is easy to read quickly.

A word about backgrounds: backgrounds may be pictures, graphics or colors, but lemon yellow text does not show up well on an image of the picnic at town hall. Slate Gray text is difficult to read on a solid black background. It doesn't matter what the latest artistic bells and whistles are or what colors are the current standard of design, if you can't reach your target audience - **your customers!** Have friends and store employees read the pages as a test. If they say it's hard to read, change it.

#### NAVIGATION

If you have multiple pages in your website (which you should), you have to navigate between the pages. You can do this via simple links or navigation bars. The navigation bars can run down either side, across the top or bottom or be links associated with images and plain text. One children's clothing shop had images of shoes, pants, shorts, dresses, etc and each image linked to a page listing the brands carried. Also, keep the size in mind. The navigation should not be the main focus of the page but neither should it be so small that its difficult to use.

#### CUSTOMER EMAIL SIGN-UP

Almost every retail site visited had a sign up for customer email. Less than 5% did not offer email sign-up. If you have a website and do not request customers to sign-up to receive emails, you need to. Some sites just ask for first and last names and email address. Others had a highly detailed form but only required first and last name and email address. One gift shop asked questions about colors, bedding size, preferred styles, etc. One ladies wear store asked for the customer's birthday, spouse's name, and spouse's email (explaining that the spouse would receive an email with the customer's wish list and a coupon prior to the customer's birthday). The point here is **ask**. You won't get any information if you don't ask for it.

Incentives for email sign-up were varied. Some offered gift cards or printable discount coupons, some offered to give sale discounts on pre-sale days. A couple of shops asked for email addresses to support being green and save trees. Special "only for email recipients" sales offers were also frequently used.

Since the cost of direct mail is soaring and staff time must be maximized, every website needs to have a customer sign-up area. The easiest to find are those that are fixed in the same place on every page. Seeing the customer email sign up more than once tells the customer you, the retailer, are serious about your email notices.

#### IMAGES

For a retail website, images are important. If you use images, be sure they are bright and crisp. Images made in that dark corner may have been easy to make, but it makes the merchandise appear dingy and white shirt appear yellowed. One store had images of different brands worn by somber models probably provided by vendors, but they also included pictures of the store with happy customers and sales staff interacting and having fun. Those pictures conveyed action- buying and friendship. Of course, any image of merchandise should show the item at its best. We recommend at least one image of the store on the website. Having the picture of the store front

gives your customers something to look for and identify when they are coming to the store the first time. Pictures of the store interior should also be clean and bright. If you have people in your store images, you must have their written permission to do so, unless they are store employees.

### SCROLLING

With all the web devices available, scrolling can be a deterrent. Consider this personal preference *of the customer*. If you think your customers would prefer to not have to move down the page, be sure each page fits in one screen. Either way, long pages are generally frowned on. Always put the most important information/images at the top of the page.

### DIRECTIONS

Always include the physical address of the store and the local phone number. Basic directions are always helpful. Many sites, in lieu of providing written directions, used maps or links to mapquest.com or maps.google.com. The main thing is that customers can find you.

If you are in a mall, give directions to your store inside the mall. Be sure to include the closest entrance to your store and which level you store is on. If the mall has a site also, you can link to their map of the mall layout.

### EVENTS

This is an optional page. Properly used, it can be an inexpensive advertising bulletin. However, if you choose to have an events page, you have to maintain it. This is March. If you still have holiday or year-end events featured on your events page, shame on you! Once you make a commitment keep it.

One gift store listed all the planned events for the entire year. The event page prompts the customer to click on a month and all the events for that month are listed. This store had all their events listed out to the "Last Chance Inventory Clearance Sale" in January 2011. Apparently this store updates once a year, but the information was current.

Event information should include dates and a brief description of the event. It can be as simple as "3/29/2010 - 4/3/2010 Spring Dresses" or as complex as "Beginning April!, Come celebrate 152 years of '[city]'. Parade Saturday, April 17 featuring our [local] high school ending at our town square. Spring Artists Celebration April 23, 24 and 25 featuring local artists. Join us each weekend in April for special sales! Come and support [our city]!"

### STAFF

This page also needs to be regularly maintained. If you have a high turnover it is probably best to avoid having a staff page but if you elect to have one, keep it current. Remember, when Mr. Jones retires after 42 years of outstanding service, he needs to be removed from the staff page or updated to an honoree status. Some stores featured only the owner and one or two other key employees. Having a an image of the store owner makes the site more personable.

### ABOUT OUR STORE

Use this to give a brief history of your store. When and who founded the store; what the specialties are, etc. Do not include facts that are important to **only you and your employees** ("We were awarded top retailer of our town in 1964" or "In 2003, we were able to add warehouse and break room facilities"). Remember, you are marketing your store to your customers, not to you and your employees.

### SERVICES

Customize this page to best display your offerings and to fit your customers needs. Do you provide alterations? Do you provide private consultations? Closet organization? Personal shoppers? Use this area to highlight any services that set your business apart from the others.

## LINKS

If your store is in a mall, a link to the mall is good, especially to the map of the mall so your customers can find you in the mall. Links to charities, the chamber of commerce, publications or vendor sites (only if they do not sell directly to consumers) that may interest *your customers* are also good.

## SPECIAL EFFECTS:

Sound should generally be avoided unless the customer is forewarned. One site had an assortment of videos that were displayed as links and were all excellent. Another had sound clips of their store's original radio commercials (before television).

Some sites had links to YouTube videos. One store had a virtual tour of the store. Another had a video aimed at graduating college students explaining what they should and should not wear to job interviews. Excellent idea by the way!

A flash presentation is catchy and can draw in casual viewers to further explore your site. It can also show a wide variety of merchandise quickly without the potential customer doing anything. A flash presentation can feature very few slowly evolving images or give a quickly changing glimpse of many things from merchandise to brand names to store images. If you opt to use flash, make sure it doesn't impress your customers with what a great web designer you have instead of what great merchandise you have. Most sites visited used a flash presentation on the home page only although one also used it on the brands page as well.

So much of designing a website is artistic preference, but it must appeal ***first and foremost to the customers***. It is your on-line yellow pages ad but with color and a lot more information. Use it wisely.

Note: Use this information to do a quick review of your web site to see if any changes or updates are needed. Then, make them to get the most out of your investment.

## QUOTE OF THE MONTH

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"You can't do today's job with yesterday's methods and be in business tomorrow."  
Mark Weber, Donna Karan International

## JOIN ONE OF OUR NEW E-SWAP GROUPS

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Don't be left out! Send us an email to learn how to connect with other similar retailers around the country to share, learn and become a better and more profitable retailer.

E-SWAP is a new, unique peer group for independent retailers! With E-SWAP you get the benefit of being part of a supportive group of peers without the usual time and money investment required by traditional peer groups.

For just \$12.95 a month you can be a member of one of our new E-SWAP Groups. SWAP means Share With A Peer and that is what you will be doing: sharing with and learning from your peers.

For more information, send us an email to [eswap@the-retail-advisor.com](mailto:eswap@the-retail-advisor.com) with your name in the subject line and we will email back to you detailed information OR click here to go directly to the web page giving all the information by clicking on this link: [http://www.the-retail-advisor.com/peer\\_groups.html](http://www.the-retail-advisor.com/peer_groups.html)

Do it today because you owe it to yourself to have a group of trusted, sharing advisors helping you with your business.

## OPEN-TO-BUY

### Announcing a new lower pricing structure for our Open-To-Buy Service.

If you are tired of trying to decide how much of each type of merchandise to buy when at market, or if you are having trouble with cash flow, you owe it to yourself to try using an Open-To-Buy. We normally find that retailers who follow an Open-To-Buy enjoy increased Sales, higher Gross Margin and Profit and better Cash Flow.

Now, you can have a professionally generated Open-To-Buy, including a monthly review by someone with over 30 years retail experience for as little as \$230 a month (after a one-time set-up fee that includes help with setting Stock Turn Rate and Markdown percentage goals and the development of an annual Gross Margin Plan by classification).

We do not require any long-term commitments so you can cancel with just 30 days notice. Call us at 1-877-206-1299, visit us on the web at <http://www.the-retail-advisor.com/open-to-buy.html> or send an email to [LC@the-retail-advisor.com](mailto:LC@the-retail-advisor.com) to get more information, sign up and get started on your way to a more profitable store.

## WHAT WE DO . . .

- o [Monthly Open-To-Buy Service](#)
- o Open-To-Buy Implementation on Your System (if available)
- o Merchandise Performance Evaluation
- o [Shrinkage Control](#)
- o Development of Incentive Plans
- o [Development of Job Descriptions](#)
- o Seminars On Retail Subjects
- o Financial Analysis
- o Financial Budgeting and Cash Flow Projections
- o Computer/POS System Evaluation, Selection, Usage
- o Policy and Procedure Development
- o [Lead Tele-SWAP Groups](#) (Share With A Peer)

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