

Pulling Your Customers on the Internet

Traditional marketing is all about "pushing" products. Find out why internet marketing is all about the "pull" and how you can learn to do it right.

By Cliff Ennico

A reader sent in the following question recently in regards to attracting more visitors--and buyers--to their site:

"I run a small, one-person business selling football-related collectibles. I've had my own website since 1992--almost one of the first people to have a site. Over the years, of course, technology has drastically changed, and my positioning on internet searches like Google has dropped significantly as more and more people are getting into this game. How can I improve on this without spending an arm and a leg? Do you know of anyone who can offer improvements and make those changes on an existing website? I would ideally love to get a focus group to critique my website, but I know that can run into a small fortune. Do you have any ideas, suggestions or references to help out us small guys?"

Hold on a second: You've had a website since 1992 and only recently has your position in the search engine rankings gone down? Must be one heck of a site!

There was a time, not too long ago, when I used to think the phrase "internet marketing" was a contradiction in terms. Traditional marketing is all about "pushing" products to consumers, and on the internet, you can't "push" or force viewers to see things they don't want to see. An entire industry of software products--from antispam filters to "pop up" blockers--has sprouted up overnight for the specific purpose of preventing marketers from getting their messages through to you when you're online.

You can't "push" on the internet, but what you can do is "pull" them to your site. On the web, a consumer runs free like a wild stallion, going wherever his head takes him. You're the one who must "corral" the free-range consumers and lead them to your water.

When people go looking for stuff on the internet, what do they use? A search engine, of course. That's where your advertising

focus should be--letting the consumers think they've found you and have made the "free choice" to click on a link to your site and see what you've got to offer.

The first thing you have to do is optimize your site for search engines, so that when people go looking for the stuff you sell, your website shows up as one of the top ten "hits" on the search query results page. This is as much an art as exact science and it involves selecting the most common keywords people use to search for your stuff and then making sure those keywords are embedded in your site so the search engine crawlers can find them.

Since you have limited funds, it may be worth your while to learn how to do this yourself. Several how-to books exist on this subject, most notably [Search Engine Visibility](#) by Staci Thurow, [Search Engine Advertising](#) by Catherine Seda, and [Search Engine Optimization for Dummies](#) by Peter Kent.

If doing anything yourself on a computer gives you the willies, however, there is a growing industry of search engine optimization (SEO) consultants who, for fees ranging from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand dollars, can use advanced statistical methods to help identify the keywords that will drive search engine traffic to your site. A search for "SEO Consultant" on any search engine will yield about 500,000 results, many of whom are computer professionals in India and other parts of the world who may be willing to provide world-class service for a much lower rate than their U.S. counterparts. The [Organization of Search Engine Optimization Professionals](#) was formed in 2001 to develop best practices and standards for this industry--if you go to their website and click on "SEO Consultant Directory," you'll get a list of their members nearest you.

Once you've optimized your site for the search engines, you don't just sit there waiting for the hits to happen. It's now time to engage in search engine marketing--creating ads for your site that will appear next to the search query results when someone is searching for the stuff you sell.

Internet marketing expert [Catherine Seda](#) recommends you start with pay-per-click advertising on Yahoo!, as it's easier than Google for new advertisers to figure out. When you buy a

pay-per-click ad on Yahoo!, Google or any one of the major search engines, you're bidding for placement on that engine's search results. You create a short (usually less than 50 words) ad, tell the search engine how much you're willing to pay for each "click" from the ad to your website, and that's pretty much it. When a person is searching for something you sell, and they see your ad, they click on the link to your site, and the search engine automatically debits your credit or ATM card for the amount you indicated you were willing to pay. (Full disclosure: Most search engines charge a minimum monthly fee, currently \$5 for Yahoo!, whether you get any clicks or not.) Simple enough, right? Well . . .

Let's say I decide to place an ad for "small business attorney" on Yahoo! I create a wonderful ad and offer to pay that search engine ten cents (the minimum amount for ads on Yahoo!) each time someone clicks on my ad. My ad will appear on Yahoo! all right--but on page 50 of the search query results for "small business attorney". How many times have you searched for something and looked at the 50th page of the query results?

To get anywhere with search engine marketing, your ad needs to appear on the first or second page of the query results. For that to happen with my "small business attorney" ad, I'd have to pay the search engine about \$50 per click. That can add up to a significant bill each month in a real hurry, and there's no assurance that anyone who clicks my ad and gets to my site (triggering a \$50 fee for the search engine) will actually buy something once they get there.

So how do you get around that? Simple: Make your ad as narrow and targeted as possible. While a ten-cent ad for "small business attorney" won't get me anywhere, a ten-cent ad for "NY small business attorney" will get me on page two of the query results. If I raise the ante to 25 cents, I'm on page one. Of course, that narrows the range of searchers, but the ones looking for a small-business attorney in New York are the ones I really want anyway. I'll get fewer "hits" from the search engine ad, but (hopefully) a higher percentage of serious folks who'll actually contact me once they get to my site and see how truly wonderful I am.

Once you've listed some pay-per-click ads on Yahoo!, what next? According to Seda, if you're selling services, start blogging. [Create your own blog to show that you're an industry leader](#). By sharing helpful information (or just some wild, crazy, cool stuff), you'll invite blog readers to hire you. On the web, nothing beats "buzz marketing"--a friend, colleague or someone other than my mom or my PR person telling you "Hey, Joe, you've got to check out this guy's crazy blog. He's a little off the wall, but he really gets what we're trying to do here!" For advice on blogging, start with [Blogging for Dummies](#) by Brad Hill and [Blog Marketing](#) by Jeremy Wright.

If you're selling products, look for websites that already have heavy traffic and try to become their affiliate. They let you have an ad on their home page in exchange for putting an ad on your home page (plus perhaps some cash). For example, if you're selling antique toys from the 1800s and early 1900s, an ad on the [Antique Toy World magazine's website](#), will be worth its weight in gold.

Here's a tip: Look for high-traffic sites that are offering stuff that complements--but isn't the same as--your merchandise. One of the most successful web merchants in the "vintage art poster" market doesn't sell posters at all, at least not on the web. Rather, he makes and sells the high-end "acetate free" folders you use to store vintage posters that you don't want to frame and hang on your wall. Just about every "vintage poster" site has a link to him because all vintage poster collectors need these folders, and I don't think he paid more than a few dollars (maximum) for all that advertising.

Finally, if you're selling clothing, house wares or any sort of collectibles, you should seriously consider opening an [eBay Store](#). For a monthly fee starting at \$15.95, you can list dozens of items on eBay, and for a little more, eBay will even help promote your eBay Store to the major search engines so you don't have to figure out the finer points of pay-per-click advertising yourself. Have you ever searched for something on the internet and had someone's eBay Store or auction listing pop up as one of the top listings? Enough said. A new book, [Launching a Successful eBay Store](#), by Ron Mansfield, gives you all the details