

LESSONS LEARNED | BY GERSON ROSENBLOOM

Promoting a Company

The title of this article is purposely misleading. The people who most need to read this would skip right over it if the title had anything to do with the Internet. But now that you've started reading, I'm here to tell you that the Internet is critically important to the success of your company — and maybe even to your survival in years to come.

You've built a beautiful store with fabulous merchandising.

You've trained your associates well, and you have amazing systems to make your business hum. You have a great teaching staff and top-notch service department. But you believe that unlocking your front door in the morning is a terrible waste of time and a dangerous practice that might invite bargain-hunters or dishonest people. Of course, anyone serious about doing business with you will find a way, regardless of the deadbolt on your front door.

Ignoring the Internet, or doing it poorly, is like hanging a great big chain and padlock over your door.

If I had to do it over again, the Internet would have been the centerpiece of my company's sales and marketing efforts. I was one of those guys in the early days of the technology who said, "I just want an informational page because e-commerce is a race to

zero." Later, when I eventually added inventory to my site, I still thought online transactions were dangerous and figured people would call me if they wanted to buy. Wrong, wrong, wrong! And now that I've confessed my sins, I feel comfortable sharing some of the incredible miscues I've seen in our industry.

WEBSITE MISHAPS

When I visit a new city for my first round of sales calls, I do much of my research online. It boggles my mind that some people still have no Web presence whatsoever. News

flash: Most customers no longer use the *Yellow Pages*. They research their buying decisions online. And if you're not there taking control of your image, there are review sites, forums and third-party directories that will become your default image. Leaving your online personality to chance is like letting a *Yellow Pages* rep write your ad.

Of course, being there isn't enough. You have to do it well.

I've seen some unbelievable blunders on websites. When I make appointments to see dealers, I've learned to confirm their addresses. It only took going to a store once and finding a cigar shop to realize that some dealers have wrong addresses — or sometimes no addresses — on their websites. Sometimes, information is badly out of date. One dealer advertised a big Christmas sale. Unfortunately, I was reading the website in June. I can only wonder what year's sale it was. Then there are misspellings and poor grammar. Remember, this impression you're making speaks volumes about you. If you're careless online, will customers want to leave their prized instruments with you for repair?

There's more. I've seen countless empty inventory pages. I've seen links that go nowhere. I've actually seen wrong phone numbers and wrong store hours. But the worst had to be the store with a staff page featuring an owner who'd died several years ago.

Creating a great Web presence isn't a trivial job, and it needs to be part of regular business activities. I get it: For some, it's new and scary. But not taking the time to learn your way around the Internet is like not unlocking your front door each morning. **MI**

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