Realtime
publishers

Creating a Small Business Website Your Customers Will Trust

The Essentials Series

Seven Reasons Customers Do Business, Online and Offline

Greg Shields

Introduction to Realtime Publishers

by Don Jones, Series Editor

For several years now, Realtime has produced dozens and dozens of high-quality books that just happen to be delivered in electronic format—at no cost to you, the reader. We've made this unique publishing model work through the generous support and cooperation of our sponsors, who agree to bear each book's production expenses for the benefit of our readers.

Although we've always offered our publications to you for free, don't think for a moment that quality is anything less than our top priority. My job is to make sure that our books are as good as—and in most cases better than—any printed book that would cost you $40 or more. Our electronic publishing model offers several advantages over printed books: You receive chapters literally as fast as our authors produce them (hence the "realtime" aspect of our model), and we can update chapters to reflect the latest changes in technology.

I want to point out that our books are by no means paid advertisements or white papers. We're an independent publishing company, and an important aspect of my job is to make sure that our authors are free to voice their expertise and opinions without reservation or restriction. We maintain complete editorial control of our publications, and I'm proud that we've produced so many quality books over the past years.

I want to extend an invitation to visit us at http://nexus.realtimepublishers.com, especially if you've received this publication from a friend or colleague. We have a wide variety of additional books on a range of topics, and you're sure to find something that's of interest to you—and it won't cost you a thing. We hope you'll continue to come to Realtime for your educational needs far into the future.

Until then, enjoy.

Don Jones

Realtime
publishers

Copyright Statement

Realtime
publishers

Seven Reasons Customers Do Business, Online and Offline

I bought a barbeque grill this week. And although that grill will make a great addition to my family's backyard, the grill itself is in fact the least-interesting part of this story. Far more interesting than the grill is the decision-making process I went through to ultimately make its purchase. That's the theme in this series' first article: Helping you understand the reasons your customers choose to do business with you, along with the decisions they make as they move from identifying a need to ultimately making a transaction.

Although this introduction might seem overly-academic, successfully creating a Website your customers will trust requires a hard look at their decision-making processes. Although selling products and services in the online world is dramatically different than in a traditional brick-and-mortar storefront, the decisions your customers make—consciously or unconsciously—are in fact very much the same. Being successful with your Website means playing to that process.

Thus, if you're a business owner or a business decision maker looking to create a better Web presence, first change hats with me for a minute and think about the purchase process from the perspective of your potential customers. The information you learn here will directly translate into how you'll configure your Website for their needs.

Back to my barbeque grill. Prior to ever pulling out my payment card to complete the transaction, I went through a number of internal steps before even starting to compare models. My first step was in actually realizing that I needed one. The aging grill we've used for years was failing in ways that made it almost dangerous.

I soon discovered that purchasing a grill I wanted was harder then it looked. The local phone book brought forward no end of what felt like quasi-legitimate or fully-illegitimate storefronts. I found everything from fly-by-night shops with difficult-to-believe prices to outdoor stores with no specialty in actual grills. Even harder was finding a store whose employees or literature could give me useful information about past performance, ratings, and customer reviews. Indeed, finding a storefront that gave me the right level of comfort was a challenge all to itself.

Once I eventually found the store that met my standards, I walked in and browsed, comparing options, features, and capabilities. Eventually finding the item I wanted, I moved to its checkout station. At this point, I pulled out my credit card and made the purchase.

Most importantly, I found the experience pleasurable enough that I told my friends and relatives about it. My willingness to express satisfaction in the purchasing experience was easily translatable and added to the store's impossible-to-purchase word-of-mouth advertising.

The Seven Reasons People Shop

Whether this experience occurred online or was part of a brick-and-mortar storefront, there are seven identifiable reasons any person makes the decision to shop. Consider this ordered list a high-level guide as you develop your own Website you want customers to trust:

1. The potential customer **needs something**.

2. They have **discovered** that your store has that item.

3. They're comfortable with your store's **reputation**.

4. They know **where your store is** and **can easily get to it**.

5. They feel **comfortable** being in your store.

6. They **trust** your store to complete the transaction safely.

7. They're willing to **tell others** that they've transacted with you.

Again, this list might seem academic. But what many small- and micro-business owners don't recognize is how similar these decisions are, *whether customers are online or offline*. When small businesses create a Website, they are at the same time creating an attributable online presence that becomes the representation of who they are. When your business creates a Website that doesn't meet these needs, your customers will go elsewhere. With this in mind, let's analyze each of these seven reasons in greater depth, discussing how they impact the creation of a trusted Website.

The Potential Customer Needs Something

First and foremost, you have a business because you offer a product or a service your customers need. This idea represents the economic concept of *demand*. Although you can artificially influence demand through skillful advertising and a good marketing campaign, the creation of demand is usually a process that occurs outside your company's ecommerce presence.

The Potential Customer Has Discovered that Your Store Has that Item

At this very next step, your decisions have an important impact. Once a potential customer identifies a need, *finding the location where that need can be met* is next. The concepts of online visibility and Search Engine Optimization (SEO) are fundamentally important here. Smart businesses leverage the expertise of experts to assist with search engine placement and SEO.

The reason for this necessity stems from the sheer magnitude of Internet Websites, and the number that appear as a result of any online search. It is generally accepted that most search engine consumers rarely navigate past the third page of search results. Some never go beyond a result's first page. As a consequence, Websites that are not properly optimized for search engine targeting are not likely to elevate to the visibility of consumers.

Further, search engine algorithms are constantly being adjusted. Thus, "the rules" for what content is elevated before others are always being changed. Just like the real estate mantra of "location, location, location" for brick-and-mortar storefronts, even the best-designed Website will generate no business if it can't be discovered.

They're Comfortable with Your Store's Reputation

The concept of reputation is exceptionally important in business. In the brick-and-mortar world, reputation is generated through good business practices, beneficial word-of-mouth, and exceptional customer service. The same holds true in the online world, but with one important limitation: T*here is no humanity in the online world*. There are no people. Emotion is conveyed through pictures and words rather than conversations and non-verbal communication. As a result, your online reputation is a much less tangible thing that you still must develop over time.

Online reputation, then, must be gained through very different means. Those can be through the establishment of positive reviews through any of the Internet's independent consumer outlets for company reviews such as the Better Business Bureau, Yelp, Epinions, and so on. This is an organic process, as individuals interact and transact with your online business.

Creating suggestions and/or easy mechanisms for customers to leave feedback—not only on your own site but on those of independent third parties—brings about levels of positive reputation that are impossible to develop in the brick-and-mortar world.

They Know Where the Store Is and Can Easily Get to It

Step four in this process dovetails the discoverability aspect of step two. Your online presence must be easily discoverable through the Internet's common search engines, but *it must also be re-discoverable* when users want to come back. This re-discoverability means using an easy-to-remember URL and creating your Website in a way such that important URLs do not change. The assurance of static landing pages ensures that a customer's browser bookmarks and/or copied links will navigate them back when they return for more.

The physical world analog to this process involves the customer who finds your store by driving around. They might not be ready to make the decision during their first visit, and so must return before they're ready to purchase. When that store is challenging to locate or get to, customers become disincentivized to make the trip.

They Feel Comfortable Being in the Store

The fifth aspect deals with overall professionalism. As consumers, we've all been to Websites where the "feeling" associated with that site just wasn't right. Perhaps it was obvious that little time, effort, and money was invested. Maybe its checkout systems didn't include the most up-to-date identity protection technologies or its navigation elements weren't properly implemented.

Because the human aspect is so absent from the online experience, this level of discomfort is easy to create when Website design effort is not well-considered. Particularly problematic are Websites that are created through many of today's automated Website generation tools or those created by hobbyists. The result of such unprofessional effort is often a reduction in your customer's impression of your business. In short, *you can actually hurt yourself by not investing wisely in proper Website design*.

They Trust the Store to Complete the Transaction Safely

Today's recurring problems of identity and payment card theft highlight the fact that ecommerce professionalism is particularly necessary. *Any ecommerce transaction that occurs through your Website must include protections that ensure customer data is secure.* Further, those protections must be displayed to the user to instill awareness of how their data is being protected.

Of particular assistance is the online recognition that *you are who you say you are*. In my barbeque grill purchase process, I found myself visiting a number of locations, some of which felt like they were anything other than what they said they were. I found one location selling grills under a high-quality brand name, only to discover that they were anything but. I found another location selling grills as new that were actually discontinued models from a bankrupt manufacturer. Assurance that I was indeed buying what I intended to buy was difficult to ascertain.

Luckily, technologies exist in the online world to assist in reassuring customers that you are who you are. These technologies involve purchasing Website certificates, with different levels of certificate providing greater assurances that you are who you say you are. These certificates are distributed through a universally-trusted third party, who issues them only after they have completed exhaustive research to verify who you are.

Lacking the human element, adding the "trust" to your trusted Website absolutely requires such certificates. Along with those certificates can come the online assurance through special graphics or other highlights that further confirm your identity to your customers. I'll talk more about this topic in the next article.

They're Willing to Tell Others that They've Shopped There

Finally is the all-important process of reputation. When you leverage good business practices, create a well-designed online presence that "feels" correct, incorporate good customer data protection, and provide excellent customer service, you'll end up with customers *who will naturally assert their positive experiences*. Give them the automation toolsets—built directly into your Website interface—to do that with little effort. You'll find that customers will go through the effort to praise you when you make the process easy to do so.

Your Online Presence Is as Important as Your Offline Presence

This statement goes without saying in today's ever-increasing world of online commerce. Creating an online presence that is comfortable for users and enforces trust requires the right level of effort. It also requires smart tactics in leveraging professional services such as third-party trust providers, SEO experts, professional Web developers, and smart uses of naming and search engine integration.

What this first article hasn't done is tell you the technical ways in which these solutions integrate into your Website. Those more-technical answers will be explored in this series' second article.