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Creating a Small Business Website Your
Customers Will Trust
The Essentials Series

Creating a Website That Your Customers Will Trust

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Introduction to Realtime Publishers

by Don Jones, Series Editor

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Don Jones

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Creating a Website Your Customers Will Trust

Let's say you own a small business, perhaps even a micro-business. Maybe you're a plumber, a home improvement contractor, or you sell customized golf balls. Although you're good at what you do, you're not a highly-technical person. You want to expand your business into the online world, but you're not quite sure how to do so in a way that resonates with your customers.

Starting that process actually begins with a concept you might not have associated with Websites: *Trust*. Trust is the central tenet in all commerce, whether online or in-person. Without trust, our global economy would not have its many currencies. It would not have a basis for transacting. Lacking trust, there would be no incentive for trading goods and services because there would be no assurance either party would hold to their part of the bargain.

At an academic level, trust is created in economies through the universal use of established, transparent, and globally-recognized transaction practices. When you visit the local grocery store, you trust that that store isn't selling you products that are beyond their expiration date. You recognize that their prices are driven by the combined forces of demand and supply rather than a made-up number. You have confidence that only the correct level of personal data changes hands when completing a sale. You should be reading these statements and thinking, "All of these are pretty basic. Tell me something I don't know." But that is exactly my point: These established practices are so *established* into our consumer consciousness that they're no longer consciously considered when we step foot into the grocery store.

The world online, however, is a completely different story. Online, it isn't possible to feel the vegetables to make sure that they're fresh, or scan the floor to ensure its kept clean. You usually can't see the exact item you intend to purchase, instead experiencing it through carefully-constructed photos with perfect lighting and color correction. In the online world, you can't look the checkout cashier in the eye as they take your payment card, so you can't directly verify they're using your personal data appropriately.

Four Solutions for Engendering Trust

It is for these reasons that the online purchasing experience requires a set of specific additional *notifications*. These notifications assure the customer that your business practices are sound and that the customer won't be cheated in the transaction. These notifications occur through a set of commonly-accepted visual elements that convey the same sense of comfort as a clean grocery store or a well-lit department store.

These notifications must be specifically built into your Website design. In building that design, consider the following four solutions as absolutely necessary to engendering customer trust.

Your Store Is Easily Found and Your Store Is Comfortable

The business world uses the term *going concern* to recognize that businesses intend to function in the foreseeable future. Although you might not consciously consider going concern in your daily shopping, internally and unconsciously you absolutely consider it prior to making a purchase.

Consider, for example, the cargo van that pulls up to you in a parking lot. Inside are two individuals shouting to you about the “great deal” they’ve got on a set of “brand new” speakers. Most of us aren’t likely to purchase those speakers, in part because we have no assurance that their business has a going concern. Yet we will return to the national chain’s grocery store every week because we know it will be there next week and the week after that.

Factoring Search Engine Optimization (SEO) into your Website design provides a mechanism to reinforce the permanence of your business. In an online world where a Website presence can be terminated by flipping a switch, the assurance that your business will be there when it is needed creates a level of comfort that is necessary for ongoing commerce.

Your Store Has Been Given Accolades from Others that People Trust

Everyone has a list of people and organizations they trust: from government personalities to brand names to well-established businesses that have served them well over a long period of time. *The same holds true in the online world, where a set of organizations broker specifically in trust.* The aim of these organizations is to verify the identity claims of others.

Because these trust brokers advertise their business practices, and have carefully cultivated a universal sense of trust by Internet users, they can then sell their assertions to others. Today, you can purchase a Website certificate that positively verifies who you are. Such a certificate uses built-in cryptography to absolutely identify you and ensure that your identity hasn’t been stolen by another. At the same time, that certificate is issued to you by a trust broker who themselves is trusted by every Internet citizen.

Certificates are an important must-have for every ecommerce Website. Yet, the problem with certificates alone is that their functionality is often masked by Internet browsers. Without a little bit of extra assistance, non-technical customers might not be aware that the trust relationship is in place. Thus, some trust brokers take this process a step further. They offer a *trust seal* that highlights their trust of you through one or more visual notifications. Those notifications can be found on your Website, inside a search engine, or on the Website of other trusted third parties where your business is mentioned.

You Accept Various Payment Mechanisms that Are Trusted by Customers

In the grocery store, the process to pay the checkout cashier involves sliding a payment card through a slot and signing the pen pad. Or, when paying cash, the process involves handing over a few bills and expecting appropriate change in return.

These practices are well-established to the point where customers rarely even consider them. The online world works just the same. With the aging of the Internet comes a set of well-established processes that customers are used to completing during an online transaction. That process typically includes the use of a “shopping cart” and a “checkout” link. What follows is the entering of credit card and personal information (but not too much information), followed by a credit card verification step. A receipt page for printing is usually the final step in the process.

Automatically engendering trust in your customer base occurs when your Website includes these natural steps as part of its payment process. This can include using well-recognized payment “widgets” that are plugged into your Website, or leveraging external and trusted services for payment.

Your Store Is Clean

Online cleanliness is a fourth critical element in engendering trust. I walked into a computer store the other day and stepped backwards in time. Full of junk parts and useless equipment no individual would ever purchase, the store exuded an overwhelming feeling of unprofessionalism. Worse yet, the entire place was filthy. Dust had settled everywhere, and every item’s movement stirred a layer of grime that had me out the door very quickly.

No one wants to contract an illness just by entering a store. And no one wants to contract a virus or other form of malware just by entering your online storefront. Just like this dirty store, the uncomfortable feeling that *you might get malware infected* is sometimes more powerful than actually contracting the virus.

It is for this reason that every online storefront must do two things for the protection of their customers. First, your storefront must be free of malware, viruses, worms, and all forms of bad code that make their way across the Internet. Second, your store *must visually notify your users that you are indeed malware free*. That notification can occur through a logo or icon, perhaps as a component of the aforementioned trust seal. Your customers gain extra assurance when a trust seal ensures that you are malware free.

Trust Requires You and Trust Requires Others

Engendering the right level of online trust requires a two-pronged approach. First, it requires the time, effort, and funding to create a comfortable Website. This is something that you can do.

At the same time, engendering trust—particularly with new customers—requires extra attention by a third party. That three-way handshake between you, the trust broker, and your customer gives everyone the comfort that their transaction will occur safely. In this series' third article, I'll talk more about that three-way handshake and how you must add elements of reputation, visibility, and professionalism to turn your good Website into a great one.