

Introduction to Internet Marketing

Bobby Ammerman

Have you thought about marketing your wood product(s) on the internet?

Do you know how to get started? Do you feel overwhelmed by the prospect? When I began researching the subject matter for this article, I was overwhelmed. However, as I have learned from this process, marketing products on the internet does not have to be overwhelming and can even be fun given the right attitude.



First, grab the low hanging fruit

The internet is quickly becoming a powerful tool to market yourself and your products worldwide. It is amazing to think you can make a wooden widget somewhere in rural southeast Kentucky and market or sell that widget to someone in Sacramento, California, or even Shanghai, China, without removing your hands from your keyboard. In general, when comparing the cost of a brick and mortar retail store to having an on-line store, the difference in cost almost becomes astronomical. Think about the cost of renting or leasing space close to a busy street or in a shopping center. What if you just have one or two products that you are trying to sell? Do you lease, rent, or build space for one product or product type? That would be very expensive, forcing you to sell a tremendous amount of products to offset the costs. For most entrepreneurs this is just not feasible. The internet is a perfect forum for this kind of retailing because overhead costs are very low in comparison to a brick and mortar establishment. It is even possible to market products on the internet at no cost or very little cost by using free websites and on-line auctions like www.ebay.com. Free websites are generally not recommended because of their unstable nature, nor do you own the domain name of your site and they can be full of advertisements. In addition, you never know when they might start charging for your site. If you don't pay they can literally shut your site down and deny you access. EBay is not the only auction site. An internet search can reveal several others. Here are a few of them:

<http://auctions.overstock.com>
www.epier.com
www.biddingoutlet.com
www.biddersnsellers.com
www.ebidderz.com

One eBay example

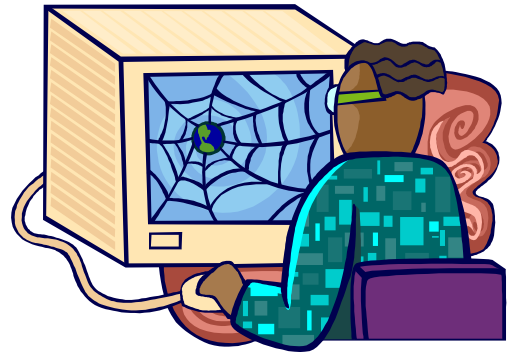
One entrepreneurial couple in particular, Paul & Kathy Easley of Oak Leaf farm in Moweaqua, Illinois has made a lucrative business selling lumber products on eBay. They will sell as little as two or three boards at a time. They saw these boards with a portable band mill and are generally sawn from trees that are harvested from their farm in accordance with their forest management plan, or they use logs that have been discarded as culls by local sawmills. In some cases these boards are sawn from diseased trees or trees that have fallen to the forest floor. Paul removes the timber before it begins to decay and saws it into products he can sell on eBay. They sell other products through eBay as well, but the boards in small quantities seem to be their staple. They usually surface the boards and wipe them down with mineral spirits so the pictures come out brilliant and show the grain and texture of the wood. The pictures are generally taken with the boards standing upright in a side by side manner to enhance the book-matched characteristics and potential artistic qualities of the wood. Paul intentionally saws the lumber in a manner that will highlight the grain patterns. Many of their customers are artists and buy the products for the artistic qualities. Kathy expounds on these qualities in her product descriptions she writes on eBay to describe their products.

Get all of the low hanging fruit

There are other ways besides free websites and auction sites where you can advertise or sell wood products very inexpensively or free. One example is the Kentucky Department of Agriculture website <http://www.kyagr.com/index.htm>. The KDA website allows you to create a free web page from their site. Just click on the buy/sell tab and then click on free web page. Because it would not be your own website, it would be limited, but why not do it? Every time you can get your product information listed in a different location on the internet the better. You can also sell your product(s) directly from the webpage. The KDA website will walk you through the process. It really is very simple to do. Another way is www.craigslist.com. This site is more like the classified ads in your local newspaper but a very powerful tool for selling various items and it is free as well. According to their site they average over 10 billion views per month. This site is somewhat similar to eBay. EBay actually owns 25% of the interest in craigslist. There are also various craft sites that you can use. The Kentucky Art and Crafts Network <http://www.kentuckycraftsnetwork.com> website is one site you can list your product (s) on and the cost is very reasonable. For a fee they will even build you a website of your own. There is also the Kentucky Craft Marketing Program located at <http://www.kycraft.ky.gov>. The purpose of the program is to expand the state's craft industry and is geared more toward wholesale items. Once you become a juried member of the program you will be listed in a searchable directory located on their website. The program offers many opportunities for a young striving entrepreneur in the craft field and should be the place to begin when deciding to start a craft business. Internet searches can find other similar sites where you can advertise and sell products.

Create your own website

The next step in the process might be to create your own website. I want to stress this does not have to be complicated. The first thing is to decide what kind of site you want to have. Do you want your site to be for information and description or do you want customers to be able to buy directly from your site, an ecommerce site if you will? The first thing to do is register a domain name. An example of a domain name is craigslist.com. Domain names can be up to 63 characters long but that doesn't mean you should use all 63 of them. Keep the name concise and easy to remember, if possible. Keep the names readable and use hyphens if needed. "bobbysboxes" for example is easy to read and to remember, but "bobbyssoutherredoakboxes" would need hyphens: "bobbys-southern-redoak-boxes". When registering your domain name you will have to choose an extension (.com, .net, .org, etc.). A website extension usually indicates something about the site, for example: ".com" usually indicates a commercial site, ".edu" indicates an education site like the University of Kentucky (www.uky.edu), and ".org" indicates an organization. The domain name is used as the address for a website. In reality the domain name represents a series of numbers called IP addresses (Internet Protocol addresses). The IP addresses work very much like your telephone number. It allows two devices on the internet to locate and communicate with each other. There are several websites you can go to in order to register your domain name. A few of those sites are:



www.godaddy.com

www.register.com

www.networksolutions.com

www.websitepalace.com

Websitepalace.com is probably the least expensive of the four. An internet search can reveal several others as well. Some ecommerce gurus are advising entrepreneurs to protect their domain names by registering their name with multiple extensions to prevent someone from copying your name if your site becomes successful. An example would be to register "bobbysboxes" as bobbysboxes.com, bobbysboxes.net, bobbysboxes.org and so on. Of course you are charged each time you register with a different extension. You do not have to build a site for each name you register though. If you want to take this idea to the next level you can obtain a domain forwarding account that will forward to the domain name you have built your website on no matter what extension someone was trying to use. An example would be if someone typed in bobbysboxes.com, but I built my site on bobbysboxes.net, the forwarding account would automatically forward that person to bobbysboxes.net. Finally, you will probably want to keep your domain name private when registering it. There is an extra charge for this but it will prevent or reduce the amount of spam your email box will receive.

Find a webhost

Once you have registered a domain name, the next step is to find a webhost. Many of the sites that can register a domain name can also host a website. You must choose/purchase a web host in order to publish your site to the internet unless it is one of those free websites, which is not recommended. Every website has to have a web host, a place for your website to reside. The webhost provides space and a location for your pages, pictures, files, and related materials. There are several webhosts available on the internet. They do not all offer the same level of support or features. The following are some things to consider about a webhost when deciding: disk space, customer service, supported software, e-mail service, web building tools, and e-commerce. If you plan to add an on-line store, does the webhost offer or provide a shopping cart as part of their package? Here is a short list of some of the webhosting company's websites:

www.powweb.com
www.godaddy.com
www.inmotionhosting.com
www.bluehost.com
www.smallbusiness.yahoo.com/webhosting
www.hostgator.com

These are just a few. There are many others that a simple internet search can reveal. Some larger companies and organizations have their own servers, eliminating the need for an external webhost.

Site creation

Once you have selected a webhost you can begin building your website. For the most part, a website consists of two basic elements, text and pictures. The majority of websites are created by using a programming language or code called HTML (Hyper Text Mark Up Language). Browsers like Internet Explorer are able to read and understand the HTML (code) and then display on your screen the text and pictures. There are other forms of code used for website construction, but HTML is the most widely used and the one that most web browsers can read.



There are different ways for creating the HTML code. One is to learn the HTML language. It is good to know HTML and it can be helpful, but not required in order to build a functional website. HTML is not difficult to learn but does take some time and may be expensive if you have to pay for a formal training class to learn it. There is no software required if you are typing the HTML code in directly. You just simply need a text editor that comes standard with nearly every computer. Another way and by far most popular is to buy a software program like Dreamweaver or CoffeeCup for

HTML conversion. As you type in text and insert pictures into these programs the software

converts the text and pictures into the HTML code automatically. If you are going to use one of these software programs to create your web pages, make sure the program you are going to use is supported by the webhost you have chosen. It is a good idea to determine this before choosing a webhost for this reason. When using one of these programs, you can create your website before you purchase a domain name or a webhost if you choose to. These software programs can be purchased online or at many retail stores that sell computers and computer software. You can also use the webpage building tools provided by some webhosts. These tools are usually very simple to use requiring very little skill and no additional software. For beginners this may be a good approach. These tools are generally no more complicated to use than your web browser. If you can point, click, and download a digital picture from a camera you can probably create a website using these tools. They can be limited, however, in terms of functionality. Off the shelf programs like Dreamweaver and CoffeeCup have much more functionality, Dreamweaver having the most of the two, but is more expensive and difficult to learn.

Another option to help make creating a website easy is to use templates. Templates are basically generic webpages/websites. They will contain links from one page to another and places to put text and pictures. You can find these on the internet. Just try to find one that closely matches the idea you have for your website. Templates provide something to start with for website development. You simply edit the information contained in them and you are off to the races. Microsoft Word and Publisher can also be used for website creation. Publisher actually has a built in wizard for creating a website and it works similar to a template. I highly recommend this for a beginner especially if you already have Publisher which would not require you to purchase software. Publisher walks you through the whole process.

Lastly, you can always hire someone to build your site for you. If considering doing this, I would recommend that you learn how to make minor changes to your site so you can keep it updated without having to depend on someone else. www.rentacoder.com is a website where you hire someone to build your site. You actually post your job on the site and take bids for the work. I want to emphasize here that just because you hire someone to build your site does not mean that you won't have to participate in the process. The coder probably doesn't know anything about your business or even your target audience. It is vital that you do the designing and planning. The coder is there to perform the technical functions of the building process. Every thing else is the site owner's responsibility.

Receiving payment for your products

If you want to sell products directly from your site there are two basic ways to do this. One is to list or display your products you have to sell on your website and require the buyer to contact you by telephone or email to place their order and make payment. The other way is to develop an online store using a shopping cart. Shopping cart software can be purchased on-line and can be integrated into your existing website. Some webhosts offer a shopping cart solution as a feature, so if you know you are going to want to add a shopping cart to your website it would be a good idea to purchase from a webhost that offers this. The most common way for receiving electronic payment is to use a PayPal account or an Internet Merchant Account. Most internet gurus are recommending PayPal. Just go to



www.paypal.com and the site will walk you through the process. PayPal can supply you with a shopping cart, allow your customers to pay with standard credit cards, or to pay with a PayPal account. When the customer clicks on “pay now” to make the payment transaction he/she is automatically directed to PayPal’s secure site, eliminating the responsibility from you for your customer’s personal information. Once the transaction is completed PayPal returns your customer back to your website. You can also use an Internet Merchant Account to process your customer’s credit card numbers. Simply conduct a Google search on Internet Merchant Account and Google will find a whole list of providers. This webpage gives a good description of what to watch out for when using an Internet Merchant Account:

www.findmyhosting.com/web-resources/Articles/internet-merchant.htm.

Google has a check-out application as well. You can find more information on their program by going to www.checkout.google.com.

Creating traffic



Assuming at this point you now have an active website, how do you get traffic to your site? Without the traffic how do you sell? It is the same for the brick and mortar stores. If you can not get people to come in to your store, you will have no sales. That is why successful brick and mortar retailers build their store near busy places and spend significant dollars on advertising. The whole marketing process for the internet works the same. You may still have to advertise your products in order to create the traffic to your on-line store. When trying to increase traffic to your website, there are several things to consider. First, you need for search engines to pick up or rank your website when someone conducts a search for products you sell. Think about it, how many of us when we start looking for a product online, the first thing we do is go to a major search engine like Google, Yahoo, or MS Live and type in the product we are looking for in a search? I would say most of us. So it becomes important for these search engines to find you and rank your site hopefully in the top ten. This process is called SEO (search engine optimization). Search engines like Google, Yahoo, and MS Live use algorithms to determine search rank. First, the search engines send out to the web what is referred to as spiders. These spiders crawl around the internet looking in sites to determine such things as how much content a site has, how many related links are there pointing back to a site, how many visits does a site receive, and how long do people stay on the site. They also look for HTML tags. There are three tags that every web page in your site should contain: title tag, meta description tag, and meta key words tag. These tags should appear at the top of the page just below the header tag. They should look something like this:

```
<head>
<title>should include the name of page or topic of page</title>
<metaname="description"content="should include a description of the page">
<metaname="keywords"content="should include those words that someone might use in
a search to find information contain in this page">
```

Based on the information collected by the spiders the search engines then use these algorithms to determine rank when a search is activated. In the past, the algorithms assigned a high value to the meta tags. Recently they have been placing little value on them because as people began to figure out how the search engines work the meta tags began to be abused, however they still should be included. The meta tags provides description information for a site when it is ranked by the search engines. You can also submit your site to search engines like Google, Yahoo, and MS Live. There are no guarantees this will get you ranked, but it may help. Submit your site after you have built much content and several pages. Here are the links:

<http://www.google.com/addurl/?continue=/addurl>
<https://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com/submit>
<http://search.msn.co.in/docs/submit.aspx>

Another idea to consider is an email list. Try to gather emails at every opportunity you can. When making a sale from your site or when someone is browsing your website are good opportunities to collect information. In turn, these contacts will be people that are already interested in your products. Periodically send out an email using your list that provides some sort of information pertaining to your site or the products you are selling. Sometimes this may be informative or information type emails and sometimes they may be advertising a sale on one or more of your products. Make sure you include a link in the email. You want to make it as easy as possible to get to your site. There is also PPC or Pay Per Click Advertising. All three of the major search engines offer a PPC program. PPC works by matching key words you give the program to words entered in a search. When someone types in one or more of your key words in a search, a link to your site may appear at the top, bottom, or sides of the search result page. You only pay for the advertisement if someone clicks on the link. You can also put a cap on the total amount you will spend on the ad for a given month and you set the price for each click. Of course the more you pay “per click” the more often your link will appear on the search result page. Listed are the URL’s (Uniform Resource Locator) for each of the big three’s pay per click sign-up pages:

<https://adwords.google.com/select/Login>
http://sem.smallbusiness.yahoo.com/searchenginemarketing/internetmarketing.php?o=US1852&cmp=Yahoo&ctv=fp_more&s=Y&s2=S&s3=&b=25&abr=2022403522
<http://advertising.microsoft.com/uk/microsoft-adcenter>

The algorithms place a great deal of importance on the number of quality back links a site contains. Quality links are links that are related to the subject matter they are linking. There are some services on the internet that help you develop links from one site to the next, but be aware if they are not quality links, they will be ignored by the algorithms and can be detrimental. There are some other techniques to consider as well, those would include: blogs, auto responders, newsletters, forums, message boards, and taf (tell a friend) script. You can use these techniques as a way to advertise your site. Whenever you post a message on a forum or message board attach your URL. These techniques may not work for all applications but any one of them can work in the right situation. It is important to remember that creating traffic is a function of several things, lots of good content, quality back links, and consistent and constant advertising.

In conclusion, spend time on the internet. Look around and analyze what other sites are doing. A website that I found very helpful is <http://www.2createawebsite.com> and I found it while just surfing around the net looking for information on building websites. When you get started, be sure to grab the low hanging fruit first. Begin with the easy things! Take advantage of the website programs supported by the state agriculture department and give eBay and other auction sites a try. Then move into website building. Start with just a brochure or information site and slowly convert it into an ecommerce site as you gain experience and become more comfortable. Never quit learning and adding functionality and content to your site. Finally, don't be intimidated by the process, just get started.

B. Ammerman 2008

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