Making Your Site Customer Friendly
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Online selling! This can be a profitable venture or a complete disaster. How do you stop it from being the latter? By making your website "Customer Friendly."

Let's define "Customer Friendly." It means that you provide an environment where your customer can come and purchase your product and does not face any hurdles in the way.

There are certain rules to good online selling.

1. Categories
Divide your products into categories and sub-categories. Don't lump all the products together.

Imagine a site selling shoes, clothes and jewelry. It would be very difficult to find what you want if the products were all jumbled up. It would be difficult even if there were categories like Tops, Casual Shoes, Casual Dresses, Pendants and they were all mixed up. Imagine a page full of these categories.

The best way to go about it would be to have links to three different pages, one with clothes, one with shoes and a third with jewelry; then have sub-categories on each page.

2. Products Per Category Page
If you have a lot of products in each category, try not to put all of them on the same page.

If you have, say, 50 products, it is better to break them up into 10 - 15 products per page. The break-up really depends on your design and space each product takes.

3. Product Pictures
Always, always have product pictures. This can't be stressed enough. Even if you think what you are selling is generic stuff and people should know what it is like, give a picture.

People want to see what they are getting. One thing that is missing on the net is being able to pick up an object, turn it over in your hands and feel it. Pictures are the closest you can get to showing the product to the customer.

Don't let go of this opportunity. No one wants to buy what they can't even see, especially if they are a first time customer. Pictures are one way to convince the customer.

4. Prices
Try to keep your prices slightly below the prices at traditional brick and mortar stores.

The person who is going to purchase from you is also going to pay shipping cost; lower prices lets them justify the shipping costs.

5. Shipping Costs
Always give an estimate of the shipping costs; don't just state that shipping costs will be added. No one wants to order an item from the Internet then have a huge shipping cost charged on their credit cards.

To decide shipping costs, you can charge a minimum shipping cost or you can charge according to weight. The former will get you customers with larger orders while the latter will get you customers who are ordering very small quantities as well.

Your choice will also depend on your handling and packaging cost of each order. The customer will, of course, prefer to not have a minimum rate. This can really help in getting first time customers. For example, if a customer orders a lightweight item for $15 and is really pleased with your low shipping costs, he or she might place a larger -- and heavier -- order next time.

A minimum shipping rate will not allow you to offer this cost-saving feature to many of your potential customers.

6. Discounts and Special Offers
Retaining customers is very important. A rewards program can really help repeat purchases.

Give discounts and special offers to old customers. Your customers can earn points on every purchase they make. These points can be redeemed for prizes or discounts at your site.

If your customer has the choice to switch to another online store offering the same prices, they may not because they wouldn't want all those points to go to waste.

Additionally, special offers for old customers can make them feel welcome and important. They will keep coming back.

7. Customer Service
Always try to answer your customer's queries in a timely manner. Answering customer questions within 24 hours constitutes excellent customer service, but answering within 24-48 hours is the average for strong customer service.

Go through all the emails first to see if there are any urgent messages that need to be answered first. Remember to write a professional reply. Try not to write one liners. If the customer has placed an order, make sure you write that it was a pleasure doing business with him or her, and remember to thank your customer.

If you are a home-based business, don't give your customer an impression that this is just a side-business that you are running to keep you occupied. Give the impression of a professional who is serious about business. Image is everything!

8. Secure Server and Credit Card Processing
If you have a website and are selling on-line, then make sure you are fully capable to sell on-line by providing a secure server and credit card processing functions.

Too many people open up a website and expect people to order via e-mail or telephone. True, you will get some customers who will be happy to order these ways, but there are so many more potential customers that you will lose because your site isn't convenient.

Additionally, not having a credit card option means there can't be any spontaneous purchases . People will have time to think over their desire and may decide not to buy your product after all.

Not many people will give their credit card information over a non-secure server. So always use a secure server to get that information.

To set up credit card processing, you can use a merchant account, which can be set up with your internet provider, or you can use internet services that provide similar features but without many of the associated costs. Paypal is perhaps the best knows of the internet financial transaction sites, but other sites include Clickbank, 2CheckOut, CCNow, ProPay, and Kagi.

Regardless of which site you choose, there are some terms you should be familiar with and some questions you should have answered:

- **Per Transaction Fee**: Amount the company charges for processing each payment that is made through them by your customer
- **Hidden Fees:** Other fees that may not be obvious at first glance or are unusual
- **Merchants Accepted:** Whether the company accepts clients from all over the world or not.
- **Products Accepted:** Type of products that a client can sell thorugh this company.
- **Payment Method:** How the company transfers payments to its clients and what fees it charges
- **Payment Frequency:** How frequently does the company pay its clients.
- **Customer Service:** Does the company respond promptly to inquiries and is it customer friendly and reliable?

You might think that you do not need to provide a secure server or credit card processing because you are getting some customers from your site, and if you are getting customers, then you are doing enough. However, the customer who comes to your site and goes away

because he or she does not find it 'customer friendly' are most probably not going to write and tell you about it. In other words you will never know you lost that customer.

Using a secure server and making credit card processing available ensures that a customer who wants to make a purchase will not leave because your site won't process their credit card and in a secure manner.