

BusinessWeek SmallBiz

WHATWORKS

SMART ANSWERS

SELLING DIRECTLY TO CONSUMERS FROM YOUR WEB SITE

Attracting traffic is not the first order of business. Make your site look authoritative, and match it with your “online demeanor”. By Karen E. Klein

Q: My wife has developed a plant-based health product with antioxidants that she is selling direct to consumers from a Web site. What’s the best way to attract customers? —M.M., Orange County, CA

A: Your first assignment is not to attract customers, but to establish a Web presence that encourages visitors to buy from you. Particularly when you’re selling a food or health product, it’s extremely important for you to build trusting relationships with your customers.

This means not just an attractive and well-designed Web site, but also developing a specific brand for your company. You must establish your wife’s expertise in the health industry by prominently listing her credentials, her philosophy, and the care she has taken to develop the product. That care should be reflected in everything the public comes into contact with about your company. If your site looks like a fly-by-night job, you don’t answer your phones, or you don’t fill orders promptly, you’ll have trouble selling anyone on your product.

“The nice thing about the Web is that you can appear to be very big if you get your ducks in a row and do things right. You must be very disciplined and consistent and professional in your online demeanor,” says David Becker, president of Philippe Becker, a San Francisco branding and packing agency. “This doesn’t mean you need to spend a fortune on a branding agency, but you should at least try to employ the methodologies they use.” He recommends that you and your wife read up on branding online and pick up a couple of books on the topic: *Raising the Bar* (Jossey-Bass, 2004), Gary Erickson’s story of the Clif Bar company, and *Growing a Business* (Simon & Schuster, 1988), by Paul Hawken, founder of Smith & Hawken.

A good way to demonstrate your wife’s expertise and the features of her product is to create short videos featuring her introducing herself and what she’s offering. Post the videos—no more than 2-1/2 minutes long—on your Web site and at sites like YouTube (GOOG), says Joan Stewart, publicity expert at PublicityHound.com. “YouTube recently began offering a new feature called overlays. They give you the ability to offer viewers a link to your Web site that is overlaid on the video while it plays. This is going to be a super-powerful Internet marketing tool,” she says.

ADVERTISE IN YOUR MEDIUM

Once your company is branded and your site looks professional, is consistent, and offers compelling information about your product and how to order it, you’ll be ready to concentrate on attracting traffic. Ethan Siegel, president of Orb Audio, has been selling his line of speakers direct to consumers online since 2002. He recommends that you concentrate initially on low-cost online advertising. “We’ve tried every form of advertising and all of it works, but nothing works better than advertising on the medium you’re trying to sell in. It’s a lot harder to get someone to go from the radio or TV to the computer to place an order,” he says. “If you eventually get the cash flow to do a local cable TV or radio ad campaign, that is great for branding and getting the word out.”

Siegel started spending \$20 a day on Google ads and now spend 10 times that much, he says: “As it worked, we kept turning the dial up higher and higher. But even \$20 can get you 40 to 100 customers a day if you find the right way to reach your market.”

In the beginning, you’ll need to experiment with different permutations of your ads and track them closely to see what responses they are getting. “The raw data you get back is astounding. In a month or so, you’ll learn so much about the potential market for your product. Even if your Google ads don’t work, they’ll teach you a lot and it’s definitely cheaper than paying for market research,” Siegel says.

Come up with a list of keywords you think your target customers will search to find products like yours and design several ads using those words. “Test which ones are working. If you’re spending a ton of money on “antioxidants” and you’re getting clicks but no conversions, stop that ad and design one that is more specifically tailored” to your product, he says.

Karen E. Klein is a Los Angeles-based writer who covers entrepreneurship and small-business issues.