

Blue Ridge Community College

Prospering In 2009 Conference

Web Marketing for Craft Artists

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I. What are people looking for in the current economy?

People are still shopping – but they are looking for the best deals they can get. Discounts, special offers, and coupons are HOT. According to a recent report from www.ComScore.com (an internet marketing research company), **coupon usage is up 33%** from last year. One surprise is that high-income households are among the highest coupon-users and deal-hunters.

If you have a website, come up with a special offer and display it prominently on your home page. For example: offer a featured item each month at a special price, offer a discount for purchases of a certain dollar amount (or based on other criteria), offer a “buy this and get xxx free”, offer a discount for signing up for your newsletter, put a printable coupon on your site. Additionally, if you are running print ads, include a discount offer for presenting the ad.

Current trends also include increased interest in making your own crafts, or buying craft kits, particularly for kids. If possible, consider adding something “hands-on” to your product line that is relatively inexpensive. For example, if you make corn husk dolls, why not sell the dolls unadorned, with a small kit for decorating it?

By offering something for those on a tight budget, or who simply have an interest in trying it themselves, you generate customer loyalty, they will remember you, and they will recommend you to others.

II. When, Where & Why do people buy your products?

- For holidays, birthdays, babies, anniversaries, weddings, other special occasions – **this is recession-proof!** In addition to the internet tips I suggest, connect with businesses in our area who cater to these events.
- Tourism. This is also relatively recession-proof. Tourists are bound to be looking for souvenirs, mementos and gifts to buy. Though buyers may be cost-conscious, they simply want to find items that give them the feeling they've bought something special at a *fair* price. Tourists also have a tendency to be willing to spend a little more when they're on vacation.
- For Home Décor. Shoppers are likely to be looking anywhere and everywhere, from brick-and-mortar stores to art galleries to the internet.
- Hospitality industry: Hotels, B&B's and restaurants dressing up their venues. However, these businesses are on tighter budgets than ever. For the time being I would not put much faith in this particular outlet, but if you have any connections to Inn or B&B owners you know, try working out a deal that will benefit you both.
- Interior Designers. I do not have much information on this, but it cannot hurt to track down professional interior designers, and simply ask them how they source their selections. You may even find some with websites who would be willing to display your goods.
- Think Multicultural. If a family needs a Piñata for a birthday party, where are they going to find one? The Asheville region is very diverse. Look into items that are needed or wanted by folks of different cultures, and see if you can incorporate something into your product line.

III. Making the Most of Your Web Site

A. If you have your own website:

Most likely, you are found when people do a search for something specific, or possibly you've been recommended by a friend or associate. But the truth is, a "standalone" site *without the support of connections to other online resources* is not likely to bring you a lot of direct sales.

On the plus side, having your own your own site gives you:

- An online business card/brochure
- The best way to link up with other websites and online resources
- The best way to exchange links with other local & regional businesses with websites
- A venue for writing articles and how-to's, a major attraction for web surfers
- Help with promoting your other marketing activities, such as conducting demonstrations, workshops or classes, etc.
- Including videos on your site
- Creating your own online community with a blog

B. If you do not have your own website:

Although I certainly recommend that you get a site, even a simple one, many of the internet marketing suggestions that follow are equally applicable whether you've got a site or not. For a professionally-built site expect to pay about \$1000 (possibly more depending on features you want.)

A few of my favorite site builders:

- www.handwovenwebs.com
- www.blueridges.com
- www.cgraydesign.com
- www.quasisuave.com

For do-it-yourself, I recommend checking out www.coffecup.com , www.xsitepro.com , and <http://Komposer.net> . (Komposer is free site-building software that is built on the foundations of the old Netscape Composer, by some of the same developers. I am currently trying it out.)

Getting a website, continued -

You will also need your own Domain Name, i.e. your www.mybusiness.com. Obtain this from www.networksolutions.com , www.godaddy.com , or www.dotster.com . Costs vary between about \$10-\$35 a year. Network Solutions is at the higher end, but they have excellent telephone support should you ever need it. Absolutely pick a dot.com. Keep it simple, descriptive, and easy to remember. Avoid needing dashes or numbers.

For your own site, you will also need a Hosting Service. This is where your website files actually reside and makes them available to the entire web. I have two recommendations:

Mountain Area Information Network (www.main.nc.us). They are local, and charge \$150 a year. Their service and support is very good – but not available 24/7.

Hostgator (www.hostgator.com). This is the company I use. Their Linux Baby plan is only \$8/month, and their service, support and features are very good. A major reason I like them is that their features include *very simple installation* of a Wordpress blog.

If you need more information about how to set up a website, please contact me and I'd be glad to help.

IV. Internet Marketing Opportunities

A. Selling Via Other Sites

Whether you have your own site or not, you can list your products on other marketplace websites. I did a simple Google search on “handmade crafts” and most of the sites I’ve listed below are in the Top Ten. I did a manual “vetting” of all of them before recommending them.

- <http://brwm.org> – Blue Ridge Web Market, local, free, operated by by MAIN. Does very well in Search engine results.
- www.handmadeinamericacraftregistry.org - The site for Handmade In America, one of the sponsors of this conference. Many of you may already be familiar with them. They provide you with a free listing of your business – take advantage!
- www.blueridgeparkwaystore.com
- www.etsy.com – 3.5% transaction fee per sale. This site has excellent internet presence and I would definitely recommend it.
- www.americacreates.com – similar to ETSY, but more upscale, and specifically targeted for American hand-made arts and crafts. It also lists galleries, guilds, events, and more. No listing fees, 25% commission on sales.
- www.handmadecatalog.com – rates vary but are reasonable
- www.craftmall.com – low flat monthly fee (no percentages), also offers a link exchange
- www.artsefest.com – monthly/yearly flat fees
- www.americanhandmadecrafts.com – various options for listing & presentation
- www.kinfolkcrafts.com – low monthly flat fees
- www.2handmade.com – Online Directory - \$20 or \$100 annual fee
- www.madeitmyself.com – small listing fees plus 3%
- www.shoplocal.com – requires contact for advertising rates. Est. \$30-\$40 per 1,000 impressions. Of all the sites I’ve listed, I believe this one is least likely to be helpful to you, but it is a popular site, so I have included it as a possibility.

B. Get your business listed (for free) in:

- Google Local at <http://www.google.com/local/add>
- Yahoo Local at <http://listings.local.yahoo.com/>
- Local.com at: <http://advertise.local.com/>

These three are extremely important! Get listed, provide as much detail as you can, and link to your site. Each requires a login, but they will not result in any kind of spam.

C. Art and Craft Online Community Sites.

One of the keys to internet marketing today is to become involved and interactive with online communities. If you actively participate as a contributor, you will gain a “following” which contributes to word-of-mouth advertising. Many communities and forums also allow you to include links to your site as part of whatever you post – a valuable source of important inbound links. Following are a few such sites:

- www.craftster.com – not for selling – it’s a social networking site for demos, articles, etc. Banner (graphic) advertisements are available, requires contact for pricing.
- <http://weartthepeople.ning.com/> - a social networking site for western NC artists, artisans and crafters. (See Social Networking for more about Ning.)
- www.indiepublic.com – online community site
- www.bluefuzzyslippers.com – online community, “free” listings and banner ad options, \$100/mo

D. List your business on geo-sites and local travel guides.

Most charge a fee, usually a reasonable rate. Following are a few examples that are consistently highly-ranked in search engines:

- www.asheville.com
- www.exploreasheville.com
- www.exploreblackmountain.com
- www.ncblueridge.com
- www.historichendersoville.org
- www.weaverville.com (coming soon)

Do a Google search on your own town for a list of similar sites.

Also:

- Your Chamber of Commerce site
- Your Guild’s site
- Your Gallery’s site, if you are represented in a gallery
- Sites for any other associations and memberships you might have.

E. Broad-scope online directories I recommend:

My reason for recommending these is that inbound links (links from other *quality, authoritative* sites) to yours are a big factor in your site’s search engine results. Getting a listing in good, broad-scope directories are helpful for sites that don’t have many links yet, and are *especially useful for brand-new sites* to get the ball rolling.

Open Directory	www.dmoz.org	Free
SoMuch	www.somuch.com	Free
SearchSight	www.searchsight.com	Free
CyberWebSearch	www.cyberwebsearch.com	Free
Infignos	www.infignos.com	Free
Clickey	www.clickey.com	Free
Best of the Web	www.botw.org	\$100/yr *excellent
Starting Point	www.stpt.com	\$99/yr
Aviva	www.avivadirectory.com	\$50/yr
Ezilon	www.ezilon.com	\$69/yr
Skaffe	www.skaffe.com	\$45 1-time
Seoma	www.seoma.net	\$15 1-time
InCrawler	www.incrawler.com	\$25 1-time
JoeAnt	www.joeant.com	\$40 1-time
FamilyFriendlySites	www.familyfriendlysites.com	\$50 1-time
Splash	www.splashdirectory.com	\$25 1-time
Gimpsy	www.gimpsy.com	\$40 1-time
WorldSiteIndex	www.worldsiteindex.com	£11 1-time

(Note on directories that are based on annual fees – all of them allow for cancelling at any time.)

F. Online “Yellow Pages” :

- <http://listings.yellowpages.com/> Free listing without web link. \$54/month with web link
- <http://advertising.superpages.com/spportal/> Free listing does include a web link, reasonably priced options for enhancing it.

Recently, Google has been emphasizing these listings a lot more than they used to. Be sure you’ve got at least a free listing (which won’t include a link to your site), and consider upgrading your online listing so that it does include a link.

Warning: do not sign up for ANY online advertising program from a telephone company, Yellow Pages or any similar company offering such services. They usually require a contract at exorbitant price, and your money would be well-spent elsewhere. Concentrate only on the listing.

V. Blogs

There is a very grey line between a “website” and a “blog” these days. You can either tack on a blog to your existing site, or you can use the Blog to *be* your entire site. You do need a site hosting account, and it does involve a software installation on the web server. The most widely-used and feature-rich blog software is WordPress (www.wordpress.org).

The **first point** of doing a blog is that it allows you to interact and stay involved with your customers, prospects, and audience in general. It also allows for easy insertion of pictures, videos, and music. Blogs are also very “social-networking-friendly” in that blog posts can be sent on to other popular sites such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, StumbleUpon, etc. You can also add “static” pages to a blog that are just like the pages of a regular website.

The **second point** of doing a blog is that it’s an easy way for a site owner to regularly add new content to their site. Search engines absolutely favor sites that frequently updated. Just make sure your content is somehow related to your business and location.

There is one other way to do a WordPress site/blog: go to www.wordpress.COM (not dot.org) and you can sign up for a free blog there. However, I do not recommend this as the best way to go, unless it’s your only option. The reason is that your site address will be something like www.mybusiness.wordpress.com. It is always preferable to have your own, independently-hosted site for search engine optimization reasons.

Finally, the best part is that you can easily manage it all yourself!

VI. Using Social Media/networking

The value of “social networking/social media marketing” for businesses is debatable – in fact, it’s being debated like crazy throughout the professional SEO and IM online world. The truth is, online social networking is still a recent phenomenon, and figuring out how to make it work for businesses is even newer. There is no consensus yet. For businesses, it will take another year or two before we have a clear idea of what actually works, and for which types of businesses.

The primary objective is to generate interest in you and your products and spread that interest to others by word of mouth, as well as getting links to your site on other people’s Facebook page, or in a Twitter “Tweet”, for example.

The primary task for you, the business owner, is to *participate*. Social Media Marketing requires being social. Be engaging, interesting, helpful and resourceful. Hard selling definitely does not work!

My opinions and advice:

Although it is experimental, I would still encourage you to at least try it out, and spend a *little* time becoming familiar with various channels and participating. It may bring you customers, but think of it as a long-term process and a secondary part of your overall marketing and advertising efforts.

Social networking is *most* useful for establishing and strengthening Branding and Identity. This may or may not be useful to you, depending on your business. It might work well for a gallery or a guild, but not necessarily for an independent potter or weaver.

Following are the most widely known and used. One of the best ways to get the most out of them is to search for *Interest Groups* to join – or create your own. Make sure to use different logins/profiles for personal and business. Trust me – I have learned that the hard way.

- www.Linkedin.com – best for professional connections, networking, and recommendations. A profile on LinkedIn carries very high search engine presence.
- www.twitter.com – best for more casual communication and networking, but the business presence is growing.
- www.Facebook.com – you can add a business page to your profile. You can also create your own Interest Group. (If you go that route, you should be prepared to spend more time on it to keep it fresh and interesting to others.) As of March 2009, I would wait a while before starting anything new with Facebook. Recent redesigns have been resoundingly booed by 95% of users, so more changes may be in the pipeline. Give it a few months and let the dust settle.
- www.ning.com – the new kid on the block. Ning is a little bit like Facebook but much cleaner and easier to work with, and is rapidly gaining recognition. It is designed for people to create *their own* social networks, or you can look for an existing one to join. As mentioned previously, there is a network for Western NC artisans at <http://weartthepeople.ning.com/>. Definitely check this one out for yourself – I’ve taken a look and it is well worth joining!

VII. Video for Your Site, and Broadcasting

Do a virtual tour of your finished products, your studio, or a series of how-to’s demonstrating your art.

Creating a video is not hard – pretty much all you need is a digital video camera and a computer. There are many inexpensive, perfectly suitable video cameras available these days. Newer computers have a port for plugging your digital video camera. Very inexpensive adapters to connect to a USB port are available if your computer doesn’t have a video-in port.

The way it generally works is that you create your video, dump it onto your computer, the log in at either YouTube or Viddler and upload your video to their site. It is now available for the entire world to see. Next, you want to embed this video on your site. To do this, you click on the button/link that accompanies your online version for “embed”. This will provide you with a small piece of code that needs to be inserted into your site, where you want the video to appear. It’s very easy to do.

Video continued –

While YouTube is more familiar to all of us, another provider – www.Viddler.com – is becoming more widely recognized. It is free, it works pretty much the same as YouTube, but it has advantages. The most important one is that you can “brand” your video with your logo or business name. You can’t do that on YouTube.

URTV

Though not directly internet-related, it’s a great marketing opportunity, and they do stream videos of their shows on their site. They generally look for production of a series of at least 6 shows that they can incorporate into their programming schedule. You need to attend an orientation class (free) and become a member, \$75/year for individuals in Buncombe. Visit the website “Get Started” page for membership info for groups, seniors & students, and residents of other counties. Visit www.urtvweb.com for details.

What you might consider is organizing a group of crafters & artisans you know, and producing a series of instructional and informational shows. For example, demonstrate and teach, explain your materials, or provide historical background information about your particular craft.

Real life example:

Every Christmas I cook an old-fashioned, dry-cured Virginia ham. This is at least a 3-day process and isn’t as easy as you might think. Since this type of ham could be considered a “heritage food” of the Appalachians, I thought of doing a cooking show to demonstrate how to deal with this beast, and about all sorts of traditional pioneer foods, cooking and canning methods. Little did I realize how much interest this sparked! Before long I was getting emails from people asking me “when are you doing it!” Sadly, my job has kept me too busy to follow up – but I know the interest is out there. The same applies to all the wonderful arts and crafts of our region, both heritage and contemporary.

VIII. e-Newsletters

An e-newsletter is a very effective way to generate customer loyalty, repeat business, and word-of-mouth. With e-newsletters, you already have an interested audience because *they* made the decision to sign up! Keep it short, simple, and offer your subscribers something of value – even if it is just free information. They are also great for advertising special promotions, events, and for thanking your customers. Better yet, offer new customers a coupon or discount for future purchases or for referring a friend. That personal touch after someone has bought your product is golden.

Follow the Can-Spam Act! When sending out emails, you must be careful how you go about it. Unless the recipient has specifically requested information and updates from you (either online or by signing a paper list), your email *will* be spam. No ifs, ands, or buts.

The optimal way to do an e-newsletter is to have a signup box on your website. To do this you employ a service company. It is very easy to set up and use. Pricing structures vary, some go by the number of subscribers you have, some go by the number of emails you send out. But monthly costs average around \$30-\$50.

Recommended e-News companies:

- www.constantcontact.com
- www.iContact.com
- www.mynewsletterbuilder.com (in Asheville)

*You can also look for newsletters published by others that offer opportunities to list your business (basically an ad) within their newsletter.

IX. SEO (Search Engine Optimization) for Web Sites

If you have a site, it is important that all search engines can find your site and all the information within it. SEO covers everything that can be done *on the site itself* to ensure your site isn't invisible, and to obtain the best possible search results/rankings.

If you already have a web site, the *first* thing you should do is make sure the fundamentals are covered!

The top most important factors to consider:

- Technical construction that allows search engines to see the information and follow all the links throughout your site. This means not using all-Flash or navigation buttons based on complicated programming. (Provide an alternative method for accessing the site contents, such as a text-based site map page as a workaround if necessary.)
- Text. That's all search engines care about. The information about your business and products needs to be in visible text (not embedded in graphics or Flash.) Your text should be written with the site visitor in mind first – *then* consider how you can insert important "keywords".
- Number of pages and extent of copy. Yes, size does matter ☺ But it has to be *relevant* content. Include information about your art, craft, materials, technique, etc.
- Inbound Links. Links from other *quality sites of related subject matter* carry a great deal of weight, especially for Google results.
- Metatags. These are the Page Title and Page Description. They are used heavily by search engines to determine if your site is a good match for what someone was searching for. They also affect how your site description appears in the search results. Each page should have its own customized Title and Description.
- Updates. Sites that are never updated will languish. Try to make some changes, even minor ones, once a month.

X. PPC (Pay-Per-Click) Advertising

The method familiar to most people is Google AdWords. These are the “sponsored listings” you will see along the right-hand side (and sometimes at the top) of a search results page. Yahoo also offers a similar program, as do many other venues.

Google works like this:

1. Sign up for an account. Billing is based on providing a credit card to charge against.
2. You set your budget. Google works on a max per day basis.
3. You specify whether you want to “prepay” or “postpay” for your ads. Choose prepay! The postpay method is much more restrictive on what you can do with your campaign. You deposit funds into your account (it’s charged to your credit card) and then Google will automatically charge your card again when your funds get low.
4. Do not worry about billing “surprises.” The entire budget and spending is entirely under your control, can be changed anytime you want, and you can also halt or delete the campaign anytime you want.
5. You can set additional factors, such as running your ads only in a certain geographic area, or only at certain days and times.
6. Your Campaign essentially consists of a list of keywords you select (Google has a tool to help you with this in the process), and a text ad you’ve written. Whenever someone does a search that includes one of your keywords, your ad will show up – depending. You have to specify how much you are willing to “pay per click”, and the amount you’re willing to spend is *one of* the factors that determines whether your ad appears, ad in what slot (#1 or #5, etc.) If a competitor is willing to spend twice as much as you, their ad is more likely to show up.
7. The way to success is to pick targeted, specific keywords, ad write your ad well – make sure it includes your keyword and if possible, has some attention-grabbing content. You can write as many ads as you want, to pair up with your selected keywords. The relevance and wording of your ad is another very important factor for when & where your ad shows up.
8. Monitor your activity, and accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative.

There are many other options and tools when using Google AdWords. Google does a fairly good job of providing explanation and help files for the whole system.

Finally, another option you may want to consider is to advertise on Facebook. It is based on the same model as Google AdWords, i.e. Pay-Per-Click. The nice feature about Facebook is that you can target your ads by location, age, gender, and other factors. Since Facebook is not yet cluttered up with advertising, it is worth investigating.

Presented by:

Fiona Dudley
Weaversites Internet Marketing
113 Pristine Lane
Weaverville NC 28787
828-231-1501
www.weaversites.com
fdudley@weaversites.com

This document is available as a PDF download on my blog at: <http://thewetsponge.com>

If you have any questions following this presentation, I would be glad to answer them. Please contact me by email (anytime), or call Monday-Friday, 9:00 – 6:00.

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