Driving Sales: A Handy Guide

Congratulations, newly minted businessperson! You've done the research, handpicked your products, and built your website. Maybe you've even got a creative domain and some sweet branding! But now that you have a business, there's much more on the horizon besides paperwork and building your company infrastructure. You've got to master the market and build your operation into a well-oiled sales machine.

You say you want to drive traffic to your website. Great idea. After all, what's a business without sales? But how can you get a jump on the competition and optimize your website and ecommerce sales strategies? We've got some ideas for you.

Having a website that is easy to use and navigate is of a great importance to the success of an ecommerce operation. Websites that aren't well designed, don't prominently feature your work or products, and don't have an intuitive user experience are going to be tough to use, and ultimately will stop your business from reaching its potential. With that being the case, it's important to make sure that your website is coherent and reflects your brand. Here's a checklist of ingredients to make your ecommerce website stand out and find success from the beginning.

Website Audit

The Importance of Images

A picture is worth a thousand words, right? If that's true (and we sure think it is), your ecommerce website should contain only the *best* images of your product and company. A strong array of product photography can make-or-break a customer's impression of your website. The style and placement of images within a website can set a tone, create a desired perception, or even lead users towards purchasing your products (UX, anyone?), all just by its design. Plus, when a website is organized and designed well, it's generally viewed as more legitimate. Branding is also important because it is *the* image that represents your company. A well-made logo is a must for any aspiring ecommerce venture.

If your business sells products (rather than services), strong photographs are *especially* crucial to marketing your inventory. Clear, edited, and well-placed images speak for themselves; generally, if the quality of the picture is strong, both in terms of its digital resolution and the composition of the image itself, the more legitimate it looks to a user. And the more legitimate and trustworthy you appear as an internet merchant, the more sales you'll make. We like sales, and we'd bet that you do too.

While you're at it, try to avoid stock photos in favor of unique, brand-specific marketing. Photos of *your* branded products that were taken specifically for your website will be MUCH more relatable than a generic photo of whatever product you happen to be selling. Additionally, featuring a single brand image across many places helps to foster a feeling of continuity on your website. Whenever possible, be as authentic as you can.

Search Engine Optimization

Search engine optimization, otherwise known as SEO, is the practice of optimizing your web presence to rank higher and show up quicker in search engine results. One of the most common ways of accomplishing this is to focus on SEO-friendly keywords, both in your product descriptions and in your website as a whole. Start by determining relevant phrases to your company; sometimes this can even include your company's name for purposes of branding the keyword as your own. The underlying point is that the closer that your website is associated with these keywords and phrases, the easier it can be found from a search.

<u>Longtail keywords</u> are keywords that are longer than average search terms, and are more specific to your business. For example, if you're a historical renovator of buildings in the Boston area that specializes in colonial-era masonry and carpentry, trying to associate yourself with terms like "Boston carpenter" or "older building renovator" isn't going to yield you much. Instead, picking a longer term that trades search frequency for a more specific tie to your business, such as "colonial-era renovator carpenter Boston," allows you to convert at a higher rate with users that are looking for someone with your specific set of skills. Longtail keywords make up for more than *seventy percent* of searched keywords on the internet; by narrowing exactly what it is that you do and creating a longer, more specific descriptor of your business, you're connecting with the people who are truly searching for you at a much higher rate than before.

In your optimizing for SEO, it's equally important to make sure to avoid coming off as spam messaging. ISPs can filter for what looks to be spam or phishing mail, so it's important to make sure you don't fall into this trap. While there are a variety of factors that can trigger the spam filter one of them is pretty straightforward; if your subject line sounds predatory, like it's advertising something that's too good to be true, or features lots of images and video with no body of text, there's a good chance it could end up in spam. Be authentic, clear, and don't lead with terms like "Limited time offer" or "Buy now" that might come across as coercive. Avoid spam like the plague.

Each page of your website has a name, but did you know that these titles are quite important in the SEO game? When listing website previews as search results, search engines will show the first 40-50 characters, or **about this much of the title of your webpage.** This means you've got to use the space to have to help yourself stand out. Creating a website title that is unique and identifiable to your company or brand will help separate your website amongst others in your niche. Some also recommend including your brand in your title so as to create a tag for yourself. As long as your title is unique, specific, and is of the right length, you're on a good track to stand out.

Mobile Optimization

People are on their phones *all the time* these days. So, shouldn't you be too?

The best way to target and capitalize on mobile shopping traffic is to make your website intuitive for users on any phone or tablet. A website that's compatible with (if not optimized for) mobile should be a top priority; some companies have even developed their own mobile apps to create a more fluid user experience and make their products more accessible to mobile shoppers. Either way, skimping out on a mobile layout will cost you, so make sure to prioritize it in website development.

Why the extra effort?

Because mobile shopping is bigger than ever. On cyber Monday in 2018, over half (54%, to be exact) of ALL visitors came to ecommerce merchants from a mobile device. In total, 30% of all purchases were made on a phone or tablet, with that number being expected to rise in the future. Optimizing for mobile allows you to retain your strong core in a desktop website while building a version that works best in the palm of anyone's hand. After all, cross device targeting for US merchants in 2018 worked out to a 16% increase in conversions for retail advertisers. It pays to cover all of the bases.

When formatting for mobile, there are a few visual items to keep in mind. It's important to make sure that any images that render as part of accessing your website are cross-platform compatible, so that any mobile user can clearly view your website and inventory. Additionally, if your ecommerce website uses any collection mechanisms to prompt visitors to enter their email (which, if you're not doing, you're missing out), these need to pop up on mobile in a way that doesn't drastically affect the user experience. Finally, make sure that your website looks *clean*. No wayward bits of text, no videos that just never seem to load; just a crisp, clear version of your fantastic ecommerce website, optimized for mobile. After all, you don't want to miss out on 30% of your potential business!

The Right UX

By now, you've gotten people to visit your website. Great! But what are they going to do (or buy!) when they begin to peruse your pages? Optimize your users' web experience with a strong, intuitive UX design. UX, which is short for user experience, is the branch of website development that deals with creating a cohesive, engaging experience for anyone visiting a website; this is created according to the goals of the website owner. UX designers can create site maps and layouts that are designed to feature products and can actually drive users to make purchases.

A user experience that simplifies the complicated features and guides users on a pre-mapped path towards purchasing your products is optimal, but as long as your website itself is clean and easy to use, you're on the right track. A well-formed website has, above all else, strong informational architecture. IA is the method of connecting users to content in the way that is most understandable to them and easiest to find their desired information. The best UX designs come from well-designed wireframes; by creating a basic blueprint of every page before they're built, the nature of the piece-by-piece development allows for more creativity and experimentation in finding what works for you.

Fundamentally, UX designs are informed by the intersection of a business idea and a creative spark. The business idea dictates the purpose of the UX design, such as, "to facilitate purchases," or "to drive traffic towards a collections form," while the creative spark helps to actually design that channel within the existing layout. UX designers synthesize these differing inputs into a blueprint of an optimal website layout, and set about building the user experience into the plans. It's a process that integrates web development, business strategy, and consumer psychology; a good user experience can be make-or-break for ecommerce storefronts.

To really determine the direction you'll want to go, it's important to have some beta testers. Beta testers will use your website at different stages of development, interact with your UX, and then offer their thoughts on the process, allowing you to use their ideas in future development. The best way to do this is to have family, friends, or even anonymous users engage with your website and provide feedback. If you're serious about getting valuable insights, consider using a focus group to get a comprehensive view of the strengths and weaknesses of what you've created. Using this feedback to identify current and potential pain points and correct any mistakes will serve you well.

Where Can I Find My First Sale?

Now that you've found your product, identified your market, built your website, optimized it for SEO and mobile, and curated your UX design, you're ready to sell. But since sales don't grow on trees, where *do* they come from?

Generating leads is the first step in the sales cycle. It's where the life of the prospect begins, and the potential for a customer starts from. There are right ways (collecting contact info of interested users) and wrong ways (purchasing email lists) of generating leads for sales, but before taking any sort of drastic measures, the first step is to leverage the power of your personal network. This includes everyone from friends and family to professional connections.

Even before you branch out into a business network, start your efforts with those close to you. Starting close to home has an inherent advantage in that the people who you're close to have a personal interest in seeing your success; even if they don't make a purchase, they're more likely to engage in a referral, and to help spread the word about your ecommerce business.

Have a LinkedIn network? Great! Make your brand and website visible and informative on your profile. Ready to dig up that lost facebook password? Making a well-written, thoughtfully crafted post can attract a considerable amount of views. And while all of these users are at least viewing their website, they're (hopefully) being prompted for their email address…

If you've got a homegrown list of emails that you can target with a basic but informative ad campaign, this is the time to pull it out. But if you don't, leveraging social media connections for views is a great way to begin building one. Using a collections form to *organically* build future email lists is perhaps the point itself of driving traffic to your website; many people like to poke around and see before making a purchase. At the end of the day, you don't need a user to buy anything from you to become a prospect; if you can play your cards right, a prospect today can be a purchasing customer tomorrow.

But why stop with your immediate network? All across the internet, from the blogosphere to reddit to facebook, virtual enclaves of people with various interests are forming groups and communities around products, topics, and allegiances to nearly anything. If you run an online sneaker shop that takes custom requests, posting in a sneaker buy/sell/trade group on facebook allows you to deliver a pointed message to a group that is far more saturated with interest in your product than the general population.

With social media, putting a link to your website or operation in strategic places on varying platforms also allows others to share your content and contact information. Though ecommerce posts don't generally go *viral*, allowing satisfied customers to comment and endorse you publicly is always a boost to your brand. Placing your brand and website in a place where it can attract positive feedback in a public setting builds trust amongst members of the community, and can elevate the perception of your ecommerce store.

And even though it seems like everything is done on the internet these days, don't forget that in-person community meetups and gatherings take place all of the time! For all of your marketing efforts in the digital world, make sure to give your IRL market some care too! Sometimes that means sending out a piece of physical mail (bet it's been awhile, huh?), or even creating physical advertisements when and where it makes sense to do so. No medium should be off of the table when it comes to innovative marketing ideas.

How to Drive Traffic to Your Website

Simply put, website traffic (or the lack thereof) will be the boom or bust for your ecommerce business. Website traffic is exactly what it sounds like; user traffic directed towards your website. But, directed by *whom*, exactly? Well, if you're doing it right, they're directed by you! How can you herd thousands of internet views and shoot them towards your page? We've got the answers.

In 2019, a poll revealed that 44% of active Instagram users performed brand research on the platform while shopping around different outlets and websites, the highest percentage of all social media companies. This is a staggering amount; nearly half of all users are comparing items on the platform. But are you in the mix? Paid Instagram ad campaigns can put your product front and center on the screen to thousands of carefully segmented and targeted viewers. With advanced analytics tracking and the ability to customize your audience, Instagram ads are one of the best ways to reach out on social media. They're non-invasive, scrolling ads that feature a post from your company's account.

This is where having a strong brand identity and voice comes into play. Companies with engaging and informative Instagram accounts that produce ads that capture the intrigue of the viewer can reliably gain followers using this method. Having a strong call to action in the form of an image, text strip, offer, or other hook within the sponsored post (a clever name for paid advertisement) creates a resulting sense of urgency. More than anything, the urgency you create around the need to view (and eventually purchase) your product is the asset that can be leveraged for a greater gain than almost anything else.

Public Relations for Ecommerce

Traditionally, we think of public relations as being in an agency setting, tucked away in some high-rise building, handling press and outreach for their clients. But that's the *old school* thinking. In the internet economy, public relations are not only an essential facet of operating an ecommerce business, they start with you! PR is different than it used to be, but it's just as

important to building your success. Modern PR for ecommerce store includes building your company story, creating a brand that speaks for itself, and engaging with those around you in the slice of the internet that your company calls home. It's a mix of technological and IRL skills, but by the time you're done here, you'll be an ecommerce PR master.

These days, every company has a story. Some are inspiring, some are downright corny, but companies that succeed in the realm of social media have a brand voice; a recognizable, somewhat distinct tone or manner of communication from the account. Some are witty, some are sarcastic some are guilty of pandering and some truly walk the line, but all find success in connecting with customers through social channels because of their relatability. This is especially true with younger audiences, who are much more likely to engage with a brand with an active voice.

But behind every brand is a brand story. A brand story is the makeup of *who you are* as a company. Curating your brand story provides a narrative that can bring your company to life. There's more to a successful ecommerce operation than just a website where users can purchase products. Telling the story of your company- *who are we, what do we do, why do we do it* – gives users an opportunity to connect with the true life and substance of your operation. If you've got a business selling custom quilts, talk about how your love of quilting and passion for design came together, and how quilting has been in your family for generations. If you're a drop-shipper, shape your narrative around building a side hustle for the modern economy, and innovating in a tough job market. No matter who you are, you've got a story, and stories sell.

Above all else, though, use your story to showcase what makes your company different from the others. Stories help bring your brand to life, but it's the *why* that can separate you from the rest of the pack. A compelling tale that illustrates the difference between your company and the other guys is the backbone of effective brand storytelling. All in all, your brand voice and story should let users know…

- Who you are.
- Where you came from.
- What you do.
- Why you do it.
- Why you're different.

As with anything else, though, it's important to know your audience, and to curate your content and image to be likeable and cultivate a positive image. Taking the time to share the history of you and your company, give space to feature your employees, and put some humanity into what you do not only sells, but it helps to build a community around your product. Making a point to be visible and open can only bode well for you and your business.

Direct Outreach: B2B On the Internet

Here's something to chew on. Did you know that in many cases, superstar athletes earn more from endorsement deals than they do from actually playing their sport? It's true! Tens of millions of dollars to hold a bottle of shampoo and smile? You bet. That's because influence sells; when people see a product endorsed by someone they know (and trust),

they're more likely to buy the product. You're probably wondering how pro athletes and shampoo fit into the ecommerce equation, but trust us, they do.

In every sphere of interest, there are public figures. Whether it's a pro athlete, an authority on an academic interest, or a social media influencer, having the right person associate with your brand can be a game-changer for your business. But how do you get shout-outs from an Instagram star or a testimonial from a respected person in the field?

<div align="center">Well, closed mouths don't get fed.</div>

If you're looking to gain clout on social media and on the internet as a whole, associating yourself with those holding influence in your space is a great outreach strategy. First, start by figuring out your niche. Do you print socks that exclusively feature photos of your user's pets? That's cool! Now, find a youtuber that talks about funky socks, or features creative, animal-inspired fashion. Someone in your niche who would be interested in helping you if you can do something to help them.

When you're ready to reach out, use this opportunity to explain a bit about you and your company, and then present an offer of some kind. For example, if they're willing to give you a 15-second spot in their next video and include a link, you'll give them a free pair of socks and give the first 100 customers from the video to get a discount on their order. You can even offer them a portion of the revenue from the link!

You've not only created a strong call to action, but you've set yourself up with an opportunity to collect hundreds, maybe thousands of emails from the collection forms on your website. With this kind of traffic, you might even gather enough emails for a new campaign. All just from a little bit of outreach. Neat!

Since you're a courteous and engaged citizen of the internet, you probably know there's value in participating publicly in comments and threads. But did you know that by engaging and interacting with other posts in your sphere, you're actually helping to build your own standing? Many social media search algorithms prioritize more recently active users; by consistently interacting with other similar accounts, you'll be more likely to show up as a recommended account for others to follow.

Accounts that interact with others more often will appear in previews in specialized feeds. That means that all you need to do to pop up quicker and more often for social media users is to comment and engage with similar accounts and posts. You'll also begin to show up as a follow suggestion or recommended account for others in the same space as you. It all goes back to influence; if you're a frequent commenter on posts that get many likes, you're more closely associated with that account, and can begin to share in the benefits of their popularity.

Building Valuable Relationships

It starts with a thoughtful and pointed email. Soon, you're getting a feature on their Instagram account, and you've sent them a discount code; in return, you get directed web traffic towards your website. You think to yourself, "This is amazing, I'd love to do this regularly!" And then you realize, "I absolutely can!" In fact, it's something that you *need* to be doing if you're trying to grow your following on the internet and in the ecommerce sphere.

Creating business relationships with other brands is an essential part of networking on the internet. Identifying other accounts that you can connect with and develop a relationship with brings forth collaboration and cross-promotion possibilities, a win-win for everyone! Truly successful ecommerce businesses leverage social relationships into direct traffic towards their own pages.

Content Creation

Your business should always be creating content. Whether it's for social media, email marketing, or even paper leaflets and offers, producing relevant content is the only way to stay fresh online. When you design engaging content, you draw attention to your online presence. We suggest keeping it on the simple side, and including a clear incentive to capture your viewer's focus and then, with a little help from your UX design, guide them towards viewing your inventory, and eventually making a purchase.

Having a strong **CALL TO ACTION** (we like the emphasis) is the key to any successful internet marketing strategy. These CTA's are either an image or string of text that should *compel* your reader to take an action. Sometimes, they're simple and direct (i.e. "BUY NOW"), and sometimes they're a little more complex and include images and gifs, but generally, as long as it's not complicated or looks like spam, it's worth a try. The main point of the CTA is to create urgency so as to push users to consider making a purchase, or at the very least, engage with your website.

Measuring PR Success

Now that you've developed your brand story, optimized your SEO, created email campaigns, built some valuable B2B internet relationships, and started pumping out fresh content, you're working on climbing the ecommerce ladder. At this point, it's important to think about what ecommerce marketing *success* looks like to you. Here at Ahoy!, we use a few key metrics to judge whether or not our marketing endeavors are panning out.

If you're trying to drive sales to your website, you're needing direct traffic to accomplish this. Direct traffic is web traffic of which the source or referrer is unknown. Having an increase in direct traffic means that you're being found by new users without a previous connection to your website, and is indicative of the health of your campaign.

Referral traffic, on the other hand, is traffic that comes from anywhere other than a search engine. Social media marketing, partner shout-outs, and internet advertisements are all examples of sources of referral traffic. When launching web ad campaigns, monitoring the sources, location, and open rates (more on that in a minute) are all items to keep tabs on. You can also use a paid search to place an advertisement for your business within a search engine, though we personally think that organically grown traffic is more valuable.

If you're sending out email marketing campaigns as your primary means of advertising, then you need to know about open rates and click rates, the dynamic duo of measuring email marketing success. The open rate is the rate at which users are opening your emails from their inbox. A high open rate is a testament to a strong subject line and preheader text; in

other words, this will tell you if you're good at capturing a user's attention and enticing them to learn more. But opening the email is only half the battle.

As crafty and clever as your emails might be, you're not sending it out for entertainment value; you're sending it out to drive traffic and make sales, which is why your conversion strategy is that much more important! The <u>click rate</u> is the rate at which readers who've already opened the email take the next step and actually click the link that takes them to your website. A click rate that's close to your open rate indicates that you're doing a great job of capitalizing on the users who open the email; a low click rate (paired with a higher open rate) means that you're losing people within the email, and need a stronger CTA or clearer message.

If you want to boost your open and click rates, create email campaigns tailored for different segments of emails you've collected. With each demographic group, try a different strategy that's pointed and more relatable. If you're not sure where to begin, start just by differentiating between users who've previously made a purchase, and those who haven't. Once a user has purchased something from you, you're just looking to lead them back to you rather than get them over the first-time purchasing hump, so shouldn't you approach these users differently? Correctly using your segmenting data to created more precise campaigns can result in sustained improvements in both open and click rates.

But no matter where the traffic comes from, it only matters if it turns into leads and sales! Arguably the most important number to pay attention to is your <u>conversion rate</u>. This rate measures the percentage of visitors to your page that eventually turn into sales. Conversion rates can be affected by the CTA or offer presented, your website's ease of use (UX!), and your social media presence. Essentially, the more enticing your offers are and the easier it is for visitors to navigate to making a purchase, the higher your conversion rate will be!

Direct Advertising (In Real Life!)

You're an internet business, no doubt about it. But even though we quite literally have the world in the palm of our hand these days, giving up on physical advertising is a mistake that far too many business owners make. Your storefront may be digital, but your customers are very real!

Pop-up shops are an excellent way to advertise and sell your products in a physical location; temporary, usually outdoor storefronts that are advertised online beforehand give customers in your local area a chance to come see your products in person, interact with you and your team, and have a personal interaction with your company. There's not only a tremendous way to build relationships with your customers, but often times, the pop-up aspect is related to a community initiative or event.

Sponsoring (i.e. buying space for yourself) at the event is an opportunity to engage in B2B marketing and build those valuable business relationships with others in the community. Going a step further, look for pop-up opportunities that are directly tied to something that supports initiatives related to your target audience. If you sell ironic home décor, find a pop-up for niche crafts in your area. If you sell your homemade jams and spreads, find a food truck festival that helps support the local craft food scene. No matter what you make, you'll be able to find a fit for you and your company if you look hard enough.

Turning a lead into a customer is one thing; turning a first-time customer into a repeat customer is a brand-new ballgame. Give every customer, whether it's their first time or 100th, a reason to keep coming back with a referral program. When users can accrue loyalty points and discounts simply by telling their friends and social network about your business, they can use those loyalty points and discounts on *real things* without having done *any* work at all! You know what's better than paying full price? The ability to keep earning discounts.

If you've been reaching out to others in your internet space, you recognize the value of referral partnerships. Providing custom links for influencers to share on their page in exchange for a certain percentage of the total money brought in through the effort allows them to earn real cash for no work! That's an offer that's tough to refuse.

Aside from pop-up shops and your influencer links, email marketing is still far-and-away the most consistently effective marketing tool available to ecommerce businesses. But before anything else, make sure you're effectively using collections forms. Collecting emails from anyone who interacts with your product allows you to build segmented lists, and employ this data to create targeted marketing campaigns. Reaching your customers with relevant content and a strong call to action is the foundation to a strong email marketing program; as you progress, refer back to this handy book and your ecommerce success will start to come together.