

Local Business with Local Clientele

At first glance, you might think that the Net can offer few opportunities for a business that has its clientele restricted to a small geographic area (i.e., **local** business with **local** clientele). After all, the Net is known as the "global medium."

So let me ask you this question to get the ball rolling. How much information about your business can you **afford** to insert in a Yellow Pages ad?

Exactly -- minimal. For most small business owners, it's the bare minimum as each additional word adds to the expense. Advertising is something you accept as a costly but necessary fact of life.

Or I should say... that **used** to be the thinking. Some local businesses are bucking the trend by using the Net to their advantage.

A Web site offers local businesses a very cheap and effective way to...

- advertise 24/7 without the high costs of print ads (and to update information as the need arises not when your ad contract is up)
- get the "jump" on local competitors who are stuck in the offline advertising world
- build new business
- encourage regular repeat purchases/contracts
- nurture, encourage and develop the relationship you already maintain with current customers/clients
- cement customer/client lifetime loyalty

That is... **if** you do it properly.

So let's start looking at how you can get your site **working** for your local business. The strategies to leverage a local presence are slightly different from those businesses who want global exposure. For the most part, your online efforts go hand-in-hand with your offline promotions. One needs to enhance/complement the other.

Aside: Some local business prefer a combo approach. They also want to generate a secondary affiliate income by recommending related products/services to a world-wide audience.

For example, a chimney cleaning and fireplace installation business refers global visitors to his Web site to "Do-It-Yourself" books and manuals.

Short term, this may not be on your radar. But keep it in mind for future directions.

We'll begin with the most fundamental...

Strategy #1: Provide high-value content on your Web site

Content is what **credentializes** your business. Even in a local environment, not everyone will be familiar with the quality of the product or service that you offer (or, for that matter that you even exist!).

A site gives you the chance to clearly show visitors what benefits/solutions you are offering and what makes you the best choice. Unlike an ad, there are no space restrictions due to cost concerns.

Add a local flavor to your content -- make an emotional connection. This reinforces you as a "neighborhood" business belonging to the same community or region as your target audience -- a feeling of being "from the same neck of the woods."

Quality relevant content reflects a quality business. It's as simple as that.

Strategy #2: Optimize your Web pages using your geographic area as one of your keywords

More and more people are choosing the computer over the Yellow Pages when it comes to selecting the people with whom they do business. So optimize your pages according. For example (if you are a service seller)...

"the service(s) you provide" + "geographic area you serve"

You may recall (from a previous issue) that that's how we found a bagpiper who lived only a few miles away to play at a curling bonspiel. Our bagpiper gained a new customer plus we're referred him to others... an additional "word-of-mouth" bonus for him.

Aside: Make sure that you do not optimize your pages for the "name of your business," unless your business name contains the keywords for which you wish to be found.

For example...

Optimizing your pages for...

"D.J. Smith & Sons" + "Kingston, Ontario"

... is not as good as...

"D.J. Smith & Sons Bulldozer and Excavator Services" + "Kingston, Ontario"

... which is not as good as...

"bulldozers" + "Kingston, Ontario"

... since the people who are unaware of your existence will only search on "bulldozers" or "excavators" (etc.) + the name of your local area. Simple, right?

Strategy #3 -- Promote Your Site Wherever and Whenever

People have an inherent interest in their local community, and in what's going on directly around them. They will visit a local Web site, *if* you make sure they know about it. And once they are there, it's your business they see, not your competitor's.

Train your staff to promote your **SBI!** site to all your current offline customers. Your Web site URL should be in prominent places throughout your place of business, as well as on...

- business cards
- receipts of invoices
- business vehicles
- menus
- basically, every place that your URL can be stamped.

The key is to be creative about how you get eyeballs to your URL. One fast and easy method is to staple or paper clip your business card to every receipt you print off, every credit card slip you return.

Don't hesitate to ask your customers directly for their e-mail addresses and let them know that you will be sending them news about your business periodically. You can then manually enter their addresses to your mailing list. In this case, the path to your site is through your e-zine. (An opt-in e-zine, as you will see next, warrants a strategy of its own).

OK, with those basics covered, your focus and efforts need to turn to...

- catering to your existing clients, and maintaining regular contact with them
- encouraging regular, repeat visits to your Web site
- encouraging the spread of viral "word of mouth" buzz about your business
- enticing your competitor's customers to do business with you rather than with them.

And how will you do all this? It's on to...

Strategy #4 -- Publish an Opt-in E-zine

An e-zine is not optional for local business owners. Regularly scheduled communication...

- keeps you in the forefront of your customer's mind
- builds credibility and a trusting familiar relationship
- encourages additional repeat purchases
- helps you to efficiently manage your business.

My local landscaper, for instance, could use his e-zine to remind me when it's time for spring cleaning... and for aerating/fertilizing the lawn, too! Because of his prompting, I book an appointment for both services. His April schedule begins to take shape easily, quickly and ahead of time.

Always be guided by the "*give before you take*" principle when you are developing your e-zine. No matter what your business, there is always something of value you can provide your visitors. My landscaper (to continue with the same example) could provide a section on seasonal tips -- the best spring bulbs for the local climatic zone or the opportune time to plant new shrubs.

Your readers (present or future customers) *will* appreciate it. And they'll show it by re-ordering. They'll also tell others about your business, and how cleverly you are using the Net to grow! And with that, the buzz begins to build.

I can't over-emphasize how integral and essential an e-zine is for a local business. It truly *is* a lifeline that you can use to run your business better, as well as encourage some real local "buzz" or excitement.

Special Tip

As mentioned earlier.... get your customer's e-mail address. Sure, offer a subscription page on your site. But how about asking them to sign up for your zine right in your shop... in your garage... on the special form by the cash? Don't just leave it there for them to fill out -- ask them. Tell them about the specials they'll receive, the relevant news updates, whatever it is that you deliver. Now, even if they don't visit your site (at first), *you* can visit *them* by e-mail!

Strategy #5: Offer special "Web-only" discounts

Give people a reason to go to your site often. Present it in such a way that it's the *only* place they can access particularly inviting discounts on a continuous basis.

This "carrot" encourages viral word-of-mouth buzz, *and* regular repeat visits "to see what's being offered this week."

Most local business Web site owners make the serious mistake of throwing up another "About Us" Web site. This simply serves as a Yellow Page ad lost in cyberspace. Yes, perhaps your clients may visit once out of curiosity, but they'll never visit again.

After all, why bother?

Without a valid reason to re-visit, people simply won't. An inviting and enticing Web presence worth visiting again and again requires regular updating to keep it fresh and attractive. It means being proactive -- staying ahead of the game.

This restaurant owner is certainly on the wrong track with content like this...

"Welcome to the Bear's Den Inn Online. The Bear's Den was opened in 1979 by chef Joe Smith. Featuring the best in regional cuisine, its main room seats 100, with a banquet room with space for an additional 100, blah, blah, blah..."

Yawn. Bye-bye. Your clients already know who you are, where you are, and what you do. (After all, that's why they are your clients, right?)

Instead, create a powerful incentive for your visitors like this...

This weekend only! Print off our online coupon for the on-the-house entree when you order a full meal from our extensive, mouth-watering menu.

Or one of these...

With your online coupon valid this weekend only, your first drink is on us!

See how this focuses on "what's in it for me?"

So update the specials, your entertainment, and your offers on a weekly basis. If your clients are thinking about visiting your establishment, and login to your site to check out the week's specials, they will not be impressed to see that the site hasn't been updated for a month. A serious loss of credibility that is preventable.

Or here's another angle...

Have your updates reflect the season (if applicable). Are you a car mechanic? Rev up your own site so that it's in sync with all the major seasonal tune-ups and maintenance that you do and recommend for your clients' vehicles.

No matter how you slice it, your main goals as a "local" business owner are...

1) Start publishing a stellar newsletter

2) Develop ingenious ways to inspire repeat visits and local word-of-mouth buzz. Do it now, though. The Net is a far more powerful business-builder than an offline Yellow Pages ad, or any other single promotional tool at your disposal. Actually, your site works well *with every other marketing method* you use (including your Yellow Pages ad).

Follow the above strategies -- you'll grow like mad.

Be proactive. Stay on top in your neighborhood and/or region!