

If you wish to conduct sales activity through your Web site, there are other things to consider as well. You will have to have an operational means by which to receive payment (credit card, purchase order, PayPal account, etc.), since no cash or checks can change hands. People use e-commerce to speed up the process of making purchases. Are you able to deliver? Is staff available to process orders in a timely way? Are you up to speed on requirements for shipping in response to Web-based purchases?

If your customer base is local, a Web site may be of less value to you but still necessary for customers to find your phone number, etc. If you are looking at increasing national or international sales, it is a strategy that is necessary.

In some cases, your product sales increases will depend on a learning curve among potential buyers. For example, perhaps your food product is one that is becoming known for health value or for its value in an eating trend of another type. A Web site may be a way to increase knowledge (again consider the geographic factors) among the public. Web browsing has become a favored, fun activity for many, especially the young (who are the longer-term customers). You can put information about benefits, ways of using a product, trend growth, etc., on your Web site that will in a broad way emphasize why buying your product is a good thing to do. Throughout much of agricultural production, increasing public awareness and knowledge is considered critical to future business.

Where a Web site is linked is as important as using lively graphics on it. If you decide to proceed with developing a site, consider how a customer will come across the site if the exact site address is not known. These “hyperlinks” are critical for expanding image and sales, but don’t mean as much to existing customers. You will have already let them know exactly where to go to find you on the Web.

Advantages and disadvantages

As highlighted in various studies, advantages and disadvantages of Internet use by companies are:

Advantages

- Allows small companies to compete with other companies both locally and nationally.
- Creates the possibility and opportunity for more diverse types of individuals to start a business.
- Offers a convenient way of doing business transactions, with no restrictions on hours of operation.
- Offers an inexpensive way for small firms to compete with larger companies by making their products available worldwide.
- Provides higher revenues for small companies using the Internet.

Disadvantages

- Need to manage upgrades.
- Need to assure Web site security.
- Must avoid being a victim of fraudulent activities on-line.
- Cost required to maintain a site.
- Difficulty finding qualified consultants.
- Difficulty finding and retaining qualified employees.
- No market for old computers.

Marketing considerations

Producers considering marketing over the Internet should consider some of the following:

- Businesses successful on the Internet are often those that are unique, commonly used and affordable.
- When marketing meat products on the Internet you must slaughter and process from a federally inspected plant, unless you only sell to clients in your state.
- Unique businesses succeed on-line only if people can find them.

- Promote your Web site by submitting it to several search engines repetitively and linking with other high traffic related Web sites.
- Link (with permission) to many applicable Web sites, but be cautious about having too many links that quickly redirect consumers away from your site.
- Don't link to your competitors, but check out your competitors' Web sites.
- Promote your Web site off-line by sending out cards and putting your Web address on every promotion piece.
- Find a reliable service.

Going On-line

If you are ready to go on-line you will need:

- High-speed internet
- Consider a toll free number – a risk-free way for potential customers to inquire.
- A user-friendly e-mail program (such as Microsoft Outlook) to manage client contact.

Designing your Web site

Hiring a professional Web site designer is often a good idea. Before doing this, check references and on-line work samples. Do-it-yourself design programs can be limiting and may create Web sites that look like many others. If you choose to hire a designer, here is what he/she will need to create an effective Web site.

- Photographs representing your products and/or services.
- Any printed material such as business cards, brochures and catalogs are helpful for formatting and content.
- A storyboard that gives an idea of how many pages are needed and what each page should be about, as well as what you like and dislike.

Source: Yankee Group, Forrest Research Inc.

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