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## **Using a Web Site to Keep the Attention of Your Customers**

by

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In my 20s I worked briefly walking thoroughbreds after races and workouts. There is no doubt they are big, skittish animals who always tried to bolt whenever startled by the ‘beep beep’ of a backing truck or dumpster dropped to the ground. My natural response to a rearing horse was to cower, but when that proved ineffective, I would try to tug them back into line. In the end, the best approach was calmly to return to their routine walk, at which point the disturbance went completely out of mind. As best as I can tell (and at a risk of affronting horse fanciers), thoroughbreds can hold only one idea in mind at a time.

What though does this have to do with marketing? I am certainly not going to say (in print) that customers can retain only a single idea at a time. But, like racehorses, we all tend to forget non-routine matters quickly and return to our customary patterns. For those who serve as non-routine shopping experiences, this tendency is clearly a threat. Indeed, much of marketing is an effort to keep your product name constantly in front of consumers. That is why soda companies pay to have their products appear in movies, and why sports stars carry sponsors’ logos. Short of the big bucks though, that is not a model which can be followed.

For agriculture-related businesses which operate on a year-round basis, keeping your name in front of your customers is not such a problem. A garden supply firm for example could,

following any fall sales, move on to pumpkins/Halloween, then wreaths/Christmas trees. Houseplants could fill the depth of the winter, followed by seeds, etc., into the spring planting season. The point is to keep customers thinking of you, and coming back regularly. Strictly seasonal operations like roadside stands, though, have a problem of how to help assure your customers will return when you again have product.

Web pages have can serve that purpose admirably. They are relatively inexpensive (see below) ways to communicate with customers, particularly during the off season. Your page firms your identity with customers while keeping your name in front of them on an ongoing basis, yet few are taking advantage. A quick Yahoo search turned up only three listings under "farmers' markets" in New York. One site had nice photos only, and another was for the Metro area, mentioning 38 locations but not identifying them.

The most complete was for Ithaca. That site listed operating dates, products, location (w/map), handicap access, and a vendor list. The list of over 75 food and agricultural vendors had but four with their own web sites, and of those, three were single pages (one under construction). The fourth was more complete with a current catalogue and prices so as to promote direct sales also. Certainly the remaining 70+ producers miss an opportunity. All though did have email addresses as well as telephone numbers, but note phone calls can be a real disruption while email messages require specific responses.

I also looked under "farms New York" and found a handful of listings. Most compelling was a you-cut operation which listed sales dates for this coming winter, mentioned sleigh rides available, and pushed off season sales of live trees. Massachusetts is a little ahead of us here in New York with a site for all roadside stands, including an easy search function by product or location. Each stand (according to the site) could establish a web site without additional cost, but few did so.

What you may wish to include on your site is your decision. I suggest looking over a number of existing sites for ideas and perspectives on ease of use. Likely you will want a map of some form, and list of dates and/or products and prices. A key factor is attracting repeated "hits";

without that, the whole point of keeping your name out there is lost. Several strategies and combinations are available. One is to offer useful information on how to keep deer off your newly purchased plants, or winter treatment for new plants, etc. These need periodic changing, so involve some time commitment. Another approach is to provide useful links so you will be visited repeatedly. Such things as local tourist sites may be appropriate for transient clientele, or related (but non-competing) sellers. Ideally, customers will "book mark" your site for easy access, but failing that, an easy memorable name (site address) is best.

What will this all cost you? Certainly you can spend plenty, but need not do so. For preparing your site, try advertising at a nearby high school or college -- the skills needed aren't great and can be readily mastered by teenagers. Expect a charge of around \$300 for up to 15 pages. Note, though, that a disadvantage of itinerant help is you will regularly be looking for replacements to provide updates. You will also need space on a server to hold your site. Typically 15 MB is adequate, for which a local vender (try the yellow pages) charges \$10 a month. Registering the domain name costs an additional \$35 a year, so once prepared, you are looking at the order of \$150 annually to support a site.

Returning to walking horses, my job was soon automated by a merry-go-around-like device run by a washing machine motor. If you like, you can think of a web site as a slightly more sophisticated device for keeping your customers circling around your business.