Integrating E-Commerce Into Your Enterprise

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We live in a society of immediate gratification. From 24-hour news channels to e-mails popping into our mobile phones, the modern professional has come to expect information within an instant. This fast-paced environment has helped speed information delivery to new heights, and e-commerce has hit new activity levels because of it.

The old mantra of waiting for product information, a quote or a seasonal catalogue is a distant memory. These days the average consumer or corporate buyer believes in self-service and thinks nothing of "Googling" to find their next purchase. From low-end office products to high-end technology purchases, the average person will, without a doubt, surf the Internet to locate the goods and services they require.

This paradigm shift has catapulted savvy business leaders into amazing success stories, as they have modified their sales strategies to capitalize on the Internet resources available. Online catalogues, inventory checks and order placement have expanded the standard sales force into 24-hour, seven-days-a-week sales wizards. Embracing this change and migrating existing business practices to include e-commerce is not simply an option; it is becoming a requirement for survival.

Plan before you leap

Unlike an eBay or Yahoo store, hitting e-commerce running is not necessarily the best course of action for small-business owners. If you have an existing business with existing clients, an e-commerce storefront requires thought and planning. You must make multiple decisions before your site goes live. Technical issues aside, you need to consider criteria, such as product mix, pricing, availability, payment methods and freight charges, before the launch. You want to provide your new Internet-based customers with enough incentive to purchase, but at the same time, you do not want to alienate your existing customers by offering better prices or services via the Internet.

Pricing strategy is a discussion that can go on forever. Setting a market-based price that accommodates midnight shoppers is critical. Key points to remember are credit card fees, minimum order requirements and freight rates. You need to remember that most purchasers will be paying with a credit card, so consider a service fee when setting prices. And if you do not already know your typical cost of doing business per sales order, now is a good time to figure it out. You do not want to set a $10 minimum order requirement when it takes $15 to actually process your order from start to finish.

Existing customer usage

Before you finalize any Web site plans, consult some of your customers directly to see how the new site could be beneficial to them and their interaction with your organization. Although new customers and sales via a Web site are great, additional bottom-line benefits can be obtained by cutting existing customer maintenance costs. After a few discussions with key individuals from your existing customer base, you may quickly find that your customers prefer to service themselves via the Internet. Online access to such questions as order status, shipment tracking and aging are big hitters with buyers and can quickly reduce internal administration costs.

Technology considerations

Ease of use, fast downloads and a universal marketing message are additional elements that need review prior to deploying products through the Internet. An e-commerce site should be an extension of your existing business, so a consistent look and feel is important. Nothing drives prospects away faster than a Web site that is slow to download or difficult to navigate. One critical check before going live is to have someone other than you or the core team review the Web site and try and utilize it. Not everyone thinks like you do, and not everyone looks at a Web page in the same manner. An independent review of your Web site will quickly provide insight on problem areas, and whether it will work for the general public.

Ongoing maintenance

Updating products, pricing and promotions can take a lot of time and effort. Storefronts that are integrated to your existing business software can make Web site updates a non-issue. Thankfully most ERP packages for the small to mid-market enterprise (SME) have this capability built into their packages already. This is not only a timesaver; it will guarantee your data is up-to-date. These packages require you to only make updates to your core business software, and the existing integration will upload all the changes immediately. If you have 10 or 20 products, this data maintenance may seem trivial. If you have hundreds or thousands of items, the update will quickly become overwhelming without integration.

Expanding your reach

Regardless of your personal views of the Internet, the desire to shop 24/7 is extremely popular for both consumers and businesses. This new method of marketing and ongoing customer service is definitely here to stay. It is time for the small and mid-market enterprise to take note--and to take action.

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