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Page Details

First published by:



[Amar - MSFT](#)
on 11-26-2008

Last revision by:



[Amar - MSFT](#)
on 12-19-2008

This page has not yet been rated

By Christopher Elliott

When it comes to your Web site, the number that really matters isn't visitors. It's customers.

And the question that has occupied marketing experts since the beginning of the commercial Internet is: How do you convert these browsers into people who will buy or take other desired actions on your site? How do you get them to sign up for your e-mail newsletter or download a white paper?

It's probably a question you've struggled to answer, too. I certainly have.

As a Web site publisher for more than a decade, I've done everything I could to turn the casual user into someone who will do *something*—whether it's buying a product, subscribing to a newsletter, or adding an RSS feed. And I've tried it all: pop-up windows, flashing text, graphics, contests, and giveaways.

A typical conversion rate for small-business Web sites is between 1 percent and 5 percent, according to some marketing pros I've consulted. In other words, for every 100 visitors to your site, somewhere between one and five will follow the link to your "buy this product" or to a free download.

Here are tips on how to get them there.

1. **Remember the basics, but don't oversimplify.** Yes, focusing on usability and sound design will lead to a better conversion rate. But, says Ken Burke, founder of MarketLive, a global e-commerce technology provider in Petaluma, Calif., merchants also need to guide visitors with compelling messaging and alternative navigation. Case in point: Lucy.com is a clothing retail site that lets you browse by a preferred "favorite look" you may want or by item. "These tactics are proven to engage a browser and have a high propensity to turn the same visitor into a buyer," he says.
2. **Think like a customer.** The most common barrier to boosting conversions is the business owner's mindset, says Linda Rigano, director of strategic alliances for ThomasNet, a New York-based company that helps industrial suppliers find buyers of their products and services. "A site needs to be designed based on what a potential customer wants from you, not based on what you think the customer wants," she says. How do you find out what they want? Just ask. I read the feedback I get from my site, but I also post polls and watch my Web analytics software to see where people are going. Then I build the site to suit their needs—not mine.
3. **Don't over-pitch your prospects.** Instead, give them another reason to return to your site. Ian Coburn, a sales and customer service trainer with Firefly Glow Publishing in Chicago, writes a weekly advice column for his site called "Lunch is Not a Date," which offers dating tips. This column keeps people coming back, he says, and eventually, some of them become customers. I've had a similar experience with my Web site. By submitting regular blog postings, I've attracted more visitors to my site, which has boosted subscriber numbers for my niche travel newsletter. (Since starting a blog dedicated to customer service in 2006, I've added about 10,000 subscribers.)
4. **Yes, discounts and promotions really do work.** "They close the deal," says Jeff Zimmerman, vice president of product management and marketing at Web-hosting provider Network Solutions in Belleville, Ill. "Online shoppers love a good deal, including weekly specials, free shipping, coupon codes, or discounts for multiple orders placed."
5. **Nothing sells like pictures—especially detailed ones.** Customers want to take a closer look at your products, according to Troy Sheen, chief executive of 3DVO, a Salt Lake City-based provider of e-commerce modeling and imaging services. In its own studies, 3DVO found that the most-used feature for prospective customers was the one that allowed them to zoom in closer. The second-most popular? More than half wanted to rotate the product. "Bringing the consumer closer to an in-store experience influences them to buy," he says.
6. **Add tools for reviews, comments, or ratings.** Good *and* bad reviews can build your site's credibility. Third-party reviews can add credibility to your site and potentially boost sales over the long term. Why? If you add the capability for your customers to comment, it shows you really care about what your customers think, and that you're willing to stand behind your product. Adding a comments section to my site increased traffic and newsletter subscriber numbers by more than 25 percent.
7. **Entertain.** Generating an engaged audience can bring forth more buyers. If they're bored, they won't likely reach for their wallets (and they'll probably leave your site, too). That's the assessment of Craig Hubbell, senior vice president of sales and client services for PlayNetwork, a Redmond, Wash., provider of retail in-store audio and video solutions. "Use podcasting and videocasting to promote your products and services through e-mail campaigns that drive traffic to your Web site and consumers to your store," he recommends. Those types of campaigns are found to increase click-through rates and engage consumers at a higher rate.
8. **You can't have too many "order" buttons.** If you want customers to place orders, give them plenty of opportunities. "Put order buttons not just on the home page but on other sub-pages," says Donald Plunkett, president of Scottsdale, Ariz.-based real estate agency Congress Realty. "Don't force customers to backtrack to place an order, and avoid complicated, multi-step order forms." I place a "subscribe" button at the top of every page on my site, which leads to a page where users can add either an RSS feed or sign up for my free newsletter. That way, no opportunity to sign up a new subscriber is lost.
9. **Bookmark widgets, anyone?** Giving your visitors the option of bookmarking a "buy this product" page can draw other visitors in a Web 2.0 world. Bookmarking is the ability to tag a certain page from your Web browser and then come back to it quickly. Bill Worple, president of 3Luxe, a shopping Web site based in St. Paul, Minn., says this attracts new visitors and helps previous customers find their way back quickly. "A bookmarking tool like del.icio.us allows people of like interests to share information and possibly drive additional prospects to your site," he says.
10. **Don't forget your meta tags.** These descriptions about your pages are embedded in the coding of your site, and can help with sales. "If you don't have a meta description tag, the search engines will often choose a snippet of text from your page that may not be the most persuasive," says Jill Whalen, chief executive of High Rankings, a search-engine optimization consultancy based in Framingham, Mass. "A compelling description in the search results will set your listing apart from the rest and encourage more click-throughs from the search results pages."

You can add meta tags to the header of each page, on your [Office Live Small Business](#) site or other Web publishing software. I've used meta tags to ensure searches for "travel newsletter" pull up my site, which has brought in lots of new subscribers.

Turning browsers into buyers, subscribers, or members isn't easy. Fortunately, you have lots of options for your small-business site. Stay focused on your customers' needs and give them what they need to take the next step.



About the author Christopher Elliott is an Orlando, Fla., writer and independent producer who specializes in technology, travel, and mobile computing. His work has appeared in numerous newspapers, magazines, and online. You can find out more about him on his [Web site](#) or sign up for his [free weekly newsletter](#).

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