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Tips and Tweaks to Tune-Up Your Site
By Jennifer Schiff
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Competition online is fierce — and getting fiercer all the time. Yet the number of people who actually buy from the Web sites they visit (what's known as the conversion rate) is low, only around 3.5 percent according to Mighty Interactive, an Internet consulting company that's been advising e-commerce businesses since 1994. Fortunately, there are many tips and tricks — design and usability tweaks — you can employ to make your Web site stickier and improve sales without busting your budget.

A Fairytale story
One e-commerce company (which also does a brisk business through catalog sales) that has deployed the top strategies is Fairytale Brownies of Chandler, Arizona. Fairytale, which was founded by two childhood friends in 1992, using a secret family brownie recipe, was an early e-commerce adopter, launching its first Web site in 1995.

In addition to moving to a new baking facility this month, Fairytale is unveiling its new Web site, the second major redesign in two-and-a-half years (the last redesign, in 2004, was motivated by a technology change).

"Thirty to thirty-five percent of our revenue comes through our Web site," says Eileen Spitalny, Fairytale Brownies' co-founder. "And a lot of that traffic is driven by our catalog mailings. But we would much rather have orders come through our Web site. It's more efficient and saves on expenses."

It has taken several months and lots of beta testing, but Fairytale believes it has come up with the right mix of ingredients to improve online sales. Here is its recipe for success:

Have an easy-to-find URL
A big part of Fairytale's online success is no doubt due to its URL, www.brownies.com, which it registered in 1995. "Fairytale gets a lot of direct URL entries (i.e., people literally typing in "www.brownies.com") because it has such a fantastic URL," says Jason Baer, senior director of Mighty Interactive, who has worked with Fairytale since it launched its initial Web site.

Of course these days the chances of being able to get something short and sweet like "www.brownies.com" for the price of registering the domain is close to impossible, but there are things you can do, besides paying for online advertising, to increase your chances of being found.

Baer says there are three basic rules to having a good user- and search engine-friendly URL:

1. If possible, use the base or key word, properly spelled, somewhere in the URL (assuming you cannot use just the base word).
2. Do NOT use crazy abbreviations, truncations, dashes, or weird spellings. You may think they're cute, but they make finding your site difficult.
3. However you answer the phone, that should be your domain name, even if it's a bit longer and more descriptive.

For example, if you are the Virginia Ham Company, if you cannot get the domain "www.ham.com," use "www.virginiahamcompany.com" (or possibly "www.VAhamcompany.com") NOT "www.iluvham.com" or "www.va-ham.com" or "www.vapigco.com."

Make your site pleasing to the eye with great photos

A big goal of the Fairytale Brownies site redesign was to look more contemporary. Until recently, Fairytale's catalog and Web site used a traditional white background and a basic grid-type layout. But Fairytale felt its catalog had become outdated and wanted a fresher look. So the brownie maker redesigned it, using lots of chocolate and warm earth tones and varying the product placement on pages while keeping its logo and signature dark and light purple.

To be consistent with its branding and messaging, Fairytale also decided to update the look of its Web site. But one thing that Fairytale didn't change was its use of mouth-watering photography that really makes the company's products pop.

"You're only dealing with one dimension here," says Baer. "You don't have that tactical experience. You don't have an auditory experience. You really don't have an olfactory experience. All you've got is your eyes, unlike in a store. So the value proposition is really incorporated in that photograph."

Fairytale Flavors: Pixel-perfect pictures to whet the appetite.
(Click for larger image.)

Make navigation quick and easy, all the way through checkout

While it might seem obvious, one of the biggest mistakes an e-tailer can make is forcing the customer to click through a lot of pages to find what he wants and complete the checkout process.

"Number of clicks is still a very important thing to track," says Carlos Manalo, a user experience manager at the Chicago-based interactive consulting agency WHITTMANHART. "You need to allow customers to move through the process easily and not think about it, so they can focus on shopping rather than learning how your system works."

Among user-experience experts like Manalo, there are two basic schools of thought when it comes to navigation. "The first school of thought is that the navigation is almost always at the top and sub-categories are always on the left-hand side," he says. That's the way most Web sites have been structured, and what you gain, says Manalo, is consistency.

"Man is a creature of habit, and when surfing online, the less he has to learn, the better," he says. So by presenting customers with a familiar scenario, you're improving the speed of the transaction.

However, the second school of thought is that if you are building a brand, particularly something new or unique, you may want your navigation to reflect that, but you need to be sure it works. That's why testing new features and concepts (see below) can be critical.

As part of its effort to improve its navigation, Fairytale is using several new features and

technologies. Hilary Moore, Fairytale's Web developer explains: "In our new navigation, we have rollovers and floating boxes that pop up and give you a brief description of what [each] gift is. By clarifying what our products are, we lessen confusion for new users, and get them to checkout faster."

Quick Checkout: AJAX technology reduces cart abandonment.
[(Click for larger image.)](#)

And Fairytale has even found a way to make the checkout process faster. "At checkout what was happening was that if customers had a lot of items in their cart and they had to make a change to their address or edit an item, it became cumbersome, because the page had to reload after every change," says Moore. "It took a long time, and customers would abandon their carts. Using AJAX [Advanced Javascripting and XML] technology, we're able to return results from the server without having to reload every page. That is hopefully going to reduce frustration and cart abandonment."

Use a good search engine, but only use an address book and/or a wish list if they make sense

Another key ingredient to a successful Web site is a good site-specific search engine. "There are a lot of [e-commerce companies] that buy into the cheapest search engine," says Manalo, "and that can be a big mistake. So when selecting a search engine to use on your site, make sure it delivers accurate, easy-to-sort-and-access results.

For sites that support registries, for weddings or baby showers, an address book and a wish list are definitely good features to have, says Manalo. (Fairytale Brownies, which does a lot of corporate and gift sales, will offer both an address book and a gift list on its new site.)

Update your home page regularly
Mighty Interactive's Jason Baer says e-commerce companies should be sure to use the home page to showcase their best products and update their home page when they roll out new merchandise. Moore updates Fairytale's home page at least twice a month. "I change the main product and the title and the headline to reflect whatever the season or holiday is," she says. "We have specific products for specific occasions that I feature on the home page, and we always have new photography." Moore also syncs Fairytale's home page with new product e-mails, so the company's messaging is consistent.

Fortunately, refreshing your home page doesn't have to be difficult. If you design your home page to be modular, says Manalo, you can just pop things in and out. Same goes for your main category pages.

Test things out before you make a major (or even minor) change
So how do you know if something is working or not? Test it out, say the experts.

"While you can definitely do a pretty good job taking your best guess and following best practices, having worked on hundreds, if not thousands, of Web sites, the truth is, you never know what's going to work the best until you test it," says Baer. "Testing can make a huge difference in conversion rates."

The most popular form of testing right now is something called multivariate or A/B split testing, basically tracking how well one concept or product does versus another. For example, you might feature one product or feature on your home page between 8 a.m. and 12 noon and another product or feature between 12 noon and 4 p.m. "You just basically see what converts better," says Manalo.

The important thing is to start small with any new concept or technology "and see if it's successful," he says. If it's successful, you can apply it elsewhere. However, Manalo cautions

against adding too many bells and whistles, particularly all at once, as that can overwhelm visitors, particularly repeat customers who are familiar with and may like the old version.

"The nice thing about Internet marketing" and using an Internet marketer to help you with testing, says Baer, is "the proof is in the pudding. It's very easy to determine what the return on investment is." Baer's company, Mighty Interactive, for example, provides monthly reports to all of its customers, to show what's working as well as what's not. And if something isn't working, they stop the test.

"We try to achieve a five-times return on every dollar invested from clients," most often through multivariate or optimization testing, adds Baer. "Typically when you do that it increases sales by 50 to 100 percent, and that's a pretty significant number."

And how much will it cost you to find out how to optimize your Web site? Baer says that a company like Mighty Interactive, which operates in the small and medium-sized business space, can do a site optimization report, which tells you what needs to be fixed to improve your conversion rate, for around $2,500. But he says that you can probably find Internet consultants who charge less than that (as well as much more).

In addition to word of mouth and local and/or trade or industry associations, three good resources for consultants who specialize in online retailing are InternetRetailer.com, Shop.org and Creative Hotlist.

Treat your customers well, and they will reward you with their pocketbooks
So when is the right time to update your e-commerce site?

Baer says there's no standard time, but e-tailers should pay attention to seasonal changes. "How customers use the Web and shop in October is different from how they use the Web and shop in March. And if you don't understand that, you're absolutely missing out on revenue. So I think you've got to tailor the experience, especially on the home page, around holidays and other purchasing milestones."

Manalo takes it one step further, saying that e-commerce companies should always be evaluating their site, looking out for shifts and patterns in things like conversion rates, average order value, number of visitors, as well as what design and e-commerce trends are out there. But he is quick to add that that doesn't mean you constantly have to redesign your whole site.

Tweak or Treat: Modular designs make it easy to change page layouts.
(Click for larger image.)

"It's all about iterations, not one big revolution," says Manalo. "Some of the things that I've found working in the e-commerce space are if you do a big site-wide facelift, for the first two or three months after that conversion actually dips. So you have to be careful. You have to be strategic and use brevity. Pick and choose the areas where you can optimize."

And to minimize the cost of making tweaks, Manalo advises using a modular design on your Web pages, so you can easily pop products and images in and out. "The more you can set up your site so that it scales and grows, the better," he says.

The bottom line? "You have to treat everybody who comes to your Web site as an asset," says Baer. "Not doing everything you can do to make sure you are monetizing those assets is ultimately going to be a recipe for financial failure."

Manalo agrees. "Really listen and watch what your customers are doing," he says. "Don't be afraid to talk to them. They will give you some of the best advice and some of the best ideas out there. If you can craft a better experience for your customers, they'll reward you with their pocketbooks."

Jennifer L. Schiff is a regular contributor to ECommerce-Guide.com.

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