

Creating and developing an online presence – part 3

In the next instalment of retailing online, **Stuart Jackson** looks at the crucial issue of loading the right data on to the website.

The last two features have focused on the preparatory side of the project and we left last month's episode by examining the importance of the homepage layout which, through its role as the portal to other pages, dictates the content of the rest of the website.

In this month's instalment, we delve into the characteristics and functionality that every retail website might choose to offer, commencing with the most complex issue; that of loading and managing the product file.

Loading and controlling products

Your designer will construct a database to contain all of the website's information, including specific data on each individual product line.

For example, a single item will contain "standard" data such as the supply source, brand name, barcode, description, pack size, weight, cost, RRP and VATable rating. Supporting data will consist of pictures, promotional options and a category name (for example 'vitamins') along with explanatory sales text for the consumer.

It is crucial to separate each piece of product information into individual database fields (or "cells") so that analysing,

updating and reporting can be manipulated by any one unique factor.

The loading of products takes time and can be a costly exercise. The task could be handed to a third party but to do so would require a fair amount of preparatory work anyway, be expensive and would lose benefits to be gained from the experience.

The trick is to break this complex task into parts and restrict data entry options to any one field so that it can be delegated to casual staff while control is retained through supervision by the retailer.

Create an electronic "upload" form which contains all the necessary fields of information built to force completion of each field while restricting the type of content it can contain. For example, when completing the category field, no manual text entry is permitted as the pre-determined categories are selected from a drop-down box.

The form should be built into separate stages along the lines of standard product data in stage 1, pictures, text and categorisation in stage 2 and promotional options in stage 3.

By separating aspects of the loading procedure, it is possible to restrict access to one stage (such as operationally-sensitive standard data) while permitting access to another necessary for day to day operations, for



example promotions.

The promotional stage must be designed for ease of planning and be able to handle the various types of promotion to be offered. It will require fields where a start and end date can be input to then automatically move a product's status from standard pricing to a live offer period.

Since marketing requires that promotions are given a name (such as "buy 1 get 1 free"), a list of pre-determined titles could be made available on screen so that the administrator can simply match a promoted product line to a named offer type.

Functionally, the ability to straight discount and cope with mix and match "added

value" offers is fundamental while more complex use might deal with member-only offers, promotions driven from other websites or the use of promotional codes.

At all stages of the upload section, incorporate a product "look-up" facility which will permit later, easy locating of a desired item which is to be updated or promoted.

Shopping cart functionality

The shopping cart is the main interface with your customer and should that experience prove a turn-off, you will lose that customer forever.

If only for this one section, it is worth the effort to review other famously successful

websites that provide a user-friendly shopping experience to ensure that your site contains similar functionality.

Think through the initial page that the visitor will encounter and the manner in which products will be grouped and presented so that the shopper can find them.

For instance, that first page could display tabs with the names of all the product categories for the shopper to choose from. Additionally, there could be tabs for special offers, to show a customer's most recent purchases (if logged in) or new products and what's in the news. For certain the page must contain a friendly search facility (see later).

The shopping experience should permit the user to see an on-going sub-total of their bill, contain an option to delete/amend quantities from any page, permit the browser to easily navigate in and out of the shopping cart, allow the user to save and store their purchases

so far, to choose different delivery options and alternative invoice or delivery addresses.

This is also the ideal opportunity to sell a customer something more so tempt the shopper further by having links or displays that show a list of "customers who bought this, also bought that" items, associated products to the type being purchased and featured new or promotional lines.

The complexity and number of options that can be offered will relate to the website package purchased, the skill of the designer or the cost invested.

Order status

Once a customer transaction has been completed, an email confirmation containing a unique order reference should be sent. Depending on the complexity of the website design the customer should then be able to check on the status of their order via an automated website enquiry

or at least be able to email an enquiry to your team via the website.

The search facility

Crucial to the user-friendliness of the site, the search facility's effectiveness relates directly to the quality of the website's database. Ideally, a search facility will respond to keyword entries and offer drop-down lists of results for the browser to select from. Each retailer may have further preferences for additional shortcut searching such as setting up visible lists of brands or product types for the browser to click on and narrow the search criteria.

Remember that the facility has to work both at the front end for the visitor and in the background administration function for locating products to update or promote.

Your account

Establish a relationship with the customer by offering an account facility which will both gather data on the user while offering added benefits in return. These could extend to details of what was previously ordered, saved credit card information, members-only promotions or a loyalty scheme.

Core message

Setting the database up correctly and accurately will feed through to the performance of the website in every area. While loading the products is the largest single "in house" task don't lose sight of the fact that the website must be friendly to the visitor and design each section with that goal alone. [HFB](#)



If you have any questions for Talking Shop or would like further information on Stuart Jackson's consultancy service, contact him on 0131 315 0303 or email stuart@forceofnature.co.uk or visit www.forceofnature.co.uk

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