

Ideas for increasing Web site traffic

By Patrick Galvin

BERKELEY, Calif. — In the movie "Field of Dreams," Kevin Costner built a baseball field in his backyard and thousands appeared to watch a game without even receiving a formal invitation. If only things were as easy in the online world.

Many furniture retailers and manufacturers produce beautiful Web sites featuring great graphics, well-written copy and cutting-edge technology. But when they start monitoring results, they discover that they fail to attract as many potential customers as they had hoped.

Since building the Web site for my family's business and home office furniture store in Redwood City and Oakland, Calif., in '97 (www.galvins.com), I have learned both challenges and opportunities for increasing Web site traffic.

The challenges

■ Too many Web sites: According to a recent Usenet survey, the estimated number of Web sites went from 26 million in July 1997 when we launched our site to nearly 200 million today. As the Internet forest grows thicker, it is tougher for potential customers to find your Web site.

■ Banner and pop-up ads are ineffective for retailers: During the dot-com boom, IPOs for companies that produced and sold banner ads were some of the hottest stock offerings. However, many of these companies, such as March First, have gone out of business.

Why? Research indicates that consumers have very low click-through rates for most banner and pop-up ads. Our banner ads on Microsoft's City

Patrick Galvin joined his family furniture business, Galvins Workspace Furniture in Redwood City, Calif., in 1996. Inspired by the power of public relations to drive qualified customers to the store's Web site, he left in 2002 to start his own PR firm, Galvin Communications in Albany, Calif. He recently recorded a one-hour online seminar on "Winning Public Relations Techniques for Furniture Web Sites," with strategies, tactics and best practice examples, which is available at www.galvincomm.com/prproducts.html.



The opportunities:

■ Search engine placement is critical: Like many furniture stores, we learned that being highly ranked on the major search engines is critical. When we tweaked the text on our home page so that it would boost our search engine results, we noticed that visitors from leading search engines such as

Google and Yahoo more than tripled.

Since the criteria for search engine placement are constantly evolving, it's best to seek out an expert in the rapidly growing field of search engine optimization. Also, you have to continually monitor your ranking on the most important search engines since it can change quickly, and you may need to change wording or coding on your pages to improve your ranking.

■ Links from manufacturer Web sites drive qualified visitors: Although the traffic we got from links on manufacturers' sites to ours was far lower than that coming from search engines, it was of a much higher quality. Some manufacturer Web sites drive more than \$150,000 worth of business to the store every year.

■ Pay for click works on search engines: Although a limited marketing budget kept us from trying a pay-for-click approach with Google or Overture (the search engine backbone that Yahoo recently purchased), furniture store owners have told me that key word advertising on the major search engines is one of their most productive marketing expenses. In this system, you only pay for people

Patrick Galvin created this Web site for his family's store, Galvin's, and learned that it takes a lot more than a good design for a retailer to use the Internet effectively.

who click on your text-based ad that pops up their screens when they're searching for a specific item (i.e. wood home office furniture in the San Francisco Bay Area).

■ Put your Web site on all your marketing materials: This is the simplest and easiest way to increase your Web site traffic, and it amazes me how many people fail to do this. To maximize traffic, your Web site needs to stand out whenever your company name appears. That includes delivery trucks, store signage, employee clothing, business cards, sales receipts, price lists, thank you cards, letterhead, Yellow Page listings and advertising.

■ A public relations campaign works well: When I was in the family furniture business, I worked hard to cultivate relationships with reporters at daily newspapers, and numerous journalists wrote about our store, and we even landed a prominent feature on Home & Garden Television. Each time that articles or television shows

about the store appeared, we saw a dramatic spike in Web site traffic and sales.

We created an online pressroom, and this continues to be one of the most viewed sections of the Web site. Even better, the positive press convinces people who have never purchased from the store to make a longer drive than usual. PR has greater credibility with customers than advertising because it comes from a trusted third-party source.

The power of public relations to drive qualified customers to our Web site helped inspire me to leave the family furniture business and start my public relations firm, Galvin Communications, in May 2002.

I recently recorded a one-hour online seminar on "Winning Public Relations Techniques for Furniture Websites" that is available at www.galvincomm.com/prproducts.html, with strategies, tactics and best practice examples for using public relations to promote furniture Web sites.