Ebusiness 101, Part 8: Planning and Building Your Online Storefront

Organization is key to making sales and offering a pleasant shopping experience. Your customer is busy and wants to accomplish tasks quickly with minimal frustration. They also want to find a clean and pleasing atmosphere, layout and design. Once you intrigue your visitor with your main landing page, your goal is to keep them there with simple navigation and fast check-out.

Jacob Nielsen, Ph.D., a leading website usability authority, User Advocate and principal of the Nielsen Group, explains: "The first law of e-commerce is that if users cannot find the product, they cannot buy it either." Your website is basically just an electronic catalog with a bit more technology. Use design, copy, multimedia and photographs that inform your visitor and help them buy your products. In studies, researchers found that nearly half of all sales are lost because visitors simply cannot use the site. Multiply this by the repeat business lost from the same customers and your numbers grow exponentially.

While many businesses strive to be unique, websites should use the standard navigation structure and labels of major brands. Pioneering Internet firms like Amazon have set the standard in customers' minds, making it intuitive to visit links like:

- Your Account
- Shopping Cart
- About Us
- Contact Us
- Help
- Search
- Press
- Careers

Before contacting a website designer, analyze your products and audience carefully. Outline your navigation structure ensuring it takes few clicks to reach your intended objective – a sale. Know the expectations and experience level of your user. For instance, teenagers will be more fluent

with computers and the Internet in general, though they may also be less sophisticated in reading or research strategies and have a lower patience threshold. They'll further need clever graphics and innovations to keep their interest.

Jacob Nielsen offers ten important website usability guidelines. These are:

Make the Site's Purpose Clear: Explain Who You Are and What You Do

1. Include a One-Sentence Tagline
2. Write a Window Title with Good Visibility in Search Engines and Bookmark Lists
3. Group all Corporate Information in One Distinct Area

Help Users Find What They Need

4. Emphasize the Site's Top High-Priority Tasks
5. Include a Search Input Box

Reveal Site Content

6. Show Examples of Real Site Content
7. Begin Link Names with the Most Important Keyword
8. Offer Easy Access to Recent Homepage Features

Use Visual Design to Enhance, not Define, Interaction Design

9. Don't Over-Format Critical Content, Such as Navigation Areas
10. Use Meaningful Graphics

Send your planned navigation outline to your website designer. Then, once your website's developed, gather a test group of about 10 people. Let each person run through various tasks on your website without offering help or guidance. Take notes on areas of confusion and make adjustments. If you have heavy traffic, phase in changes gradually to minimize confusion. We've all gone to the grocery store right after a reorganization, only to become even more frustrated when we can't locate the Lays or light bulbs. People get used to the way things are, good or bad. Stay tuned for our last and final series installment, Part Nine: Launching Your Plan and Building Momentum, in this ten part series.