

## Help Price-Conscious Consumers Find the Value on Your Site

*Not every online retailer can lower prices to compete.*

By Jason Meugniot,

Recession. There, I said it. As the U.S. economy "recesses," online retailers struggle to bridge the consumer's need to conserve cash and their own need to survive.

To understand what factors play a role in how consumers choose where to shop online -- especially when money is tight -- my company conducted a number of consumer polls over the past several months. We asked 1,000 consumers what matters most to them when making purchases online. Price and free shipping stood out as clear favorites -- 43 percent of respondents said price is the most important factor, while 18 percent named free shipping - and special promotions or coupons brought up a distant third.

This might initially scare retailers that can't afford to lower prices or offer deals. But while price is critical, it's not the only thing influencing where people choose to spend money online. There are plenty of ways to make a shopping experience more enticing for consumers to keep them coming back.

In fact, we followed up with a survey to determine what makes people return to a given shopping site. More than one-third of respondents (35 percent) said they're most likely to return to a Web site if it makes recommendations on products or services for sale. Another 26 percent want "a unique experience each time" they shop, and 18 percent said they're more likely to return "if the site solicits their feedback" on its products and services.

It boils down to helping people easily identify the value of what you already offer. Here are some ways to do that:

**Get your online buyers talking about your brand or products with other shoppers.** This can take the form of user reviews, product ratings, message boards, blogs, live chat, or other capabilities. Allowing your visitors to generate content on your site and interact with each other can boost sales.

According to a study conducted by PowerReviews and the e-tailing group, 82 percent of online shoppers prefer customer reviews to researching a product in-store with a sales associate, and 68 percent of shoppers read at least four reviews before making a purchase. If you don't offer reviews, you risk losing those consumers to other Web sites that do. Give them every reason to stay on your site and complete the transaction.

**Make it simple for shoppers to find -- and buy -- what they want.** This may seem obvious, but it's amazing how many sites stumble here. Your site

navigation and layout should help people intuitively find the deals they're looking for. A few tips:

- \* A common mistake: sites that don't accentuate the search function. The search box needs to be prominent. And the search function should -- well, function. Make sure it accommodates misspellings, and includes similar or related products in the results.

- \* Offer multiple ways to find products. Apparel sites might organize categories by men's and women's, or by brand or size. A secondary structure might be by lifestyle -- outdoors, indoors, etc.

- \* Offer single-page checkout. Anything that moves people off the checkout page -- to tackle tasks such as changing a billing address -- risks losing the buyer.

**Pay special attention to product presentation.** Make sure images are enticing. If you're selling furniture, for example, offer large, high-quality images with multiple views. For luggage or jewelry consider features like zoom and 360-degree views. Not every product requires every feature -- just make sure you're not losing sales simply because shoppers couldn't get a good view of what you're selling.

**Get out there and market your site.** Blog about your products and encourage customers to blog about you. Be aware of where you rank in search-engine listings and work to move up the page by, for example, partnering and sharing links with affiliates. The theme here is simple: Be active.

If you're facilitating conversation on your site, and participating in the larger conversation online, you'll get to know your customers and they'll get to know you. Your buyers will also get to know each other, and that's a great way to get beyond price and demonstrate your worth.