

What Do Mainstream Shoppers Expect as They Move Online?

As online commerce continues to be adopted by more and more mainstream shoppers, Forrester Research predicts this trend will force a shift in retailer strategies. For many consumers the rationale for shopping online is to compare price and availability at competing retailers. This behavior has been supported by a promotion driven approach to e-commerce, which has worked well for many stores. There is, however, a growing imperative to address falling levels of satisfaction with the shopping experience and credit card security.

Customer trust and loyalty are the goals of this imperative and this strategy doesn't stop with your website. Sophisticated shoppers expect their favorite retailers to offer a satisfying shopping experience in the store, on the website, on the phone, with a holiday catalog; across multiple channels. These shoppers also expect to be able to jump channels seamlessly, by browsing a print catalog to purchase from a web catalog, to order goods online for store pickup, and to research an order online before making a purchase in the store.

Online Research and Offline Shopping

A recent survey conducted for iProspect explores the link between online research and offline shopping. During the 2005 holiday season, respondents were asked about their online shopping behaviors. The result showed that 47% of respondents researched their purchase online and then walked into a store to buy, a result which is supported by similar studies.

Retailers serious about growing online need to improve the shopping experience by linking activities across channels. Here are some suggestions.

- Your customers can see their sales history from web purchases, but why can't they see all purchases they place with your store?
- Ask customers in the store whether they use your website and if they want to receive an e-mail reminder of next month's selections.

- Look for ways to link your print catalog with your website, tying together articles and product descriptions.
- Tout your safe shopping experience on your website and in the store.
- Create targeted mailings to segments of your customer base that want a more specialized shopping experience.

Providing Services Across Channels

Thinking of your website as a separate operation from your store overlooks a key advantage your site has over out-of-state or Internet-only retailers. You have the ability to offer a more complete service to customers who can touch your business in multiple ways. Consumers still prefer to visit a store to shop, but this visit often comes after some online research. Much of this channel hopping can be invisible until you start looking for it, but it is activity that needs to be encouraged. The more you can provide service for your customers across channels, the more loyalty and greater share of their business you will see.

After launching a new website it is important to find an initial lift in sales to grow your online customers' base and reach a level of traffic that attracts results from the search engines. This initial lift usually comes from price driven promotions. For some stores it will plateau at a modest amount of business that justifies the investment in the website, but this is as far as it goes. The only way to move beyond this promotion-only strategy is to build trust and loyalty by making the connections across store channels.

You will be rewarded with customers that visit your website before trying the search engines or wine directories. They will look for ways to spend their drinks budget with you so they can refer to their favorite purchases from the sales history on one website. If you can get this right, mainstream shoppers will chose your store over price competitors leaving you with a healthier business.

To learn more about how the Beverage Media can help with a website for your store, contact Ian Griffith at ian@bevmedia.com, (212) 571-3232, or visit www.bevnetwork.com/retailweb.