

BUSINESS SPRING CLEAN

Experts from a range of sectors share their approaches to help independents de-clutter their business and achieve commercial growth.

THE NECESSARY INGREDIENTS FOR WEBSITES THAT WORK

PATRICIA DAVIDSON is an independent online consultant, helping retailers with web usability, SEO and social media. She has written six books on the best places to shop online for consumers, is founder of www.thesiteguide.com and has two blogs, www.glamoursleuth.com and www.webhints.co.uk.

"No matter how much you spend on your website, no matter how fabulous your products, if you don't get the main elements of a website right at the start, it won't convert as you would like it to, and it's not always easy to ascertain why. If you get certain basic things right at the start you will give yourself the best chance.

Clear and simple navigation, otherwise known as web usability, and making it totally clear what your customers have to do in order for them to find the product they desire, are essential. This is where so many e-commerce websites fall down, trying to be over-clever (and ending up over-designed) in an effort to re-invent a wheel that has already proved its success. Follow the examples of the most successful online stores and you'll immediately see that there is a template in place that they all adhere to – they will 'tweak' this to make sure the design clearly sends the brand's message but, in essence, they keep the same navigation – or easily discernable way to the searched for products in the fewest number of clicks.

The days when one small image of a product will do are well and truly over. Before e-commerce started to grow so quickly, it was too easy to say, 'But I want to get close to the product I'm interested in, to touch it and feel it before I buy.' Now, by judicious use of large-size zoom, video, and alternative views, this is virtually possible on the screen. Just click through to www.zappos.com to see how it can really work. Websites that are not optimised properly are losing out big time on the possibility of being found for free by the search engines. SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) can be done in-house or by an external company. Setting it up for an e-commerce site is time-intensive and there is no quick fix. Identifying the key words and phrases that your customers are searching for using a tool such as Google Keyword, and then using them in the correct hierarchy from title tags through on-site content, will pay huge dividends. You can begin by a spend on Adwords, which may identify which key words and phrases are most likely to work for you but that, in my opinion, is putting



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the cart before the horse, and there can be an expensive learning curve involved. Do your research and then, with a properly optimised website, everything can stem from that.

Many visitors and customers, if you follow the above, will arrive at your website via search, either free or paid for. Once on your website, they also need to be able to search easily. Make sure you have a competent and speedy search engine in your website and that all

your products are set up in a way that makes them easy to find. There is nothing more irritating than putting 'red handbag' into a search box and getting all handbags and everything red and, trust me, it happens. Get this right from the beginning.

These are the four main ingredients that will set you on the way to having a great website. All of them break down into separate key tasks and rules. Concentrate on making your website usable (great navigation), with great pictures (strong and clear imagery), visible (SEO) and searchable, and you'll have the makings of a successful online business."

www.thesiteguide.com

FENG SHUI DESIGN FOR RETAIL SHOPS

SARAH MCALLISTER has 14 years' experience working with Feng Shui, and is founding director of www.fengshuiagency.com. She has provided Feng Shui consultations on several accessories and fashion companies in London, most recently in Boxpark, the Shoredich pop-up mall.

"You wouldn't change a successful layout concept to suit Feng Shui purposes unless there was a powerful Feng Shui reason behind it. This is why you need an expert consultant with business awareness who can make those courageous and difficult decisions that can affect your bottom line.

There is no point having a great Feng Shui designed shop, and then open it on a day that drains the owner and staff manager. Set out as you mean to continue, and commission someone who has clear credentials and is entirely open about their background and training. Here are a few simple tips, but your best investment is to hire a specialist.

Create a light and bright store, especially the entrance. So many stores appear shut so you don't want to approach them. Activate the Wealth Sector – activity of some sort in the south-east of your store layout is generally good, such as a door or cash till. However, this year carries the sickness star in the south-east, so expert advice is required that is bespoke to your premises in order to mitigate this. Also, keep the most expensive items towards the rear of the store, where energy is more settled, and the cheaper items towards the front, where energy is more active. Have men's ranges on the right of the shop when viewed from the high street outside, and the ladies' range on the left.

An in-depth, bespoke consultation would assess the orientation of the building, layout of the shop, date-of-birth of key stakeholders and staff members, branding (optional) and colours used throughout the store. It

would also advise on best positions to activate good chi for commercial gain and include a free Power Day date to make any key changes based on Chinese Auspicious Date Selection.

Have the Feng Shui consultant involved from the start – for the Boxpark project, my advice was asked a little too late once a lot of money had already been spent with the designer – but we did what we could. A full-time, experienced consultant knows how to squeeze every last inch of Feng Shui out of your space. I don't just use the simple Ba Gua, but a sophisticated tool called the Lopan Compass (pictured), which is used in Feng Shui that incorporates Chinese astrology and mathematics to determine preferred locations of objects and orientation of buildings, doorways, paths, gates, desks, cash tills and so on. My team includes experienced commercial architects and specialist builders so we can monitor the full process of a new shop creation from site selection to opening day. I'm also skilled at advising on the timing aspect of Feng Shui, not just the spatial methods."

www.fengshuiagency.com



PREVENTING PEOPLE PROBLEMS IN RETAIL



FINTAN O'TOOLE is a legally qualified HR specialist. He owns and manages HR support company HR Dept in South London and is currently chairman of Croydon Chamber of Commerce.

"Retaining good staff in the high street is a challenge for everyone, especially the independent retailer. Employment law makes no allowances for size and, whether you are employing one person or 1,000, you are bound by the terms of the Employment Rights Act, Working Time Directive and Equality Act, to name just a few. Retailers are expected to keep abreast of the myriad of changes to the law,

minimum wage and best practice, and many turn to external advisers for help. A large number of independents belong to the Federation of Small Business, which has an excellent legal helpline, and others turn to their local Chamber of Commerce for advice. In Croydon, for example, the local Chamber offers a free HR helpline to their members. This enables businesses to get some headline advice before committing to costly legal support. One member had an issue with a member of staff who had an absence problem and another sought advice having been presented with an ET1 form, which is used to

make a claim through an employment tribunal. Other Chambers and trade bodies also offer similar support.

Employers should be consistent when they manage staff, and be firm but fair. It is important that everyone has a clear picture of what is expected of them. Most of this should be included in the contract of employment or written statement, which employers must give to employees. It is well worth considering having a staff handbook, which sets out factors such as dress code, what to do when snow hampers access to the workplace, the procedures to follow when off sick and so on. It is also recommended that employers deal with issues when they arise and not leave them to fester. One incident of lateness, if not dealt with there and then, can lead to a pattern developing. A 'pulled sickie' after a late night should be discussed the next day the employee is in so that unacceptable behaviour is nipped in the bud.

Employers can minimise the risk of taking on and employing staff by working with specialist HR firms. It's hard to justify having a full-time HR resource if you are a small retailer, and a number of companies offer HR support over the phone and by email at a fraction of the cost. Some of these companies offer an insurance-backed indemnity that will cover the cost of tribunals, should an employee make a claim. There are also a number of national and local providers.

There is plenty of advice available through professionals and on the internet on the ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration) and Directgov websites. ACAS also has a helpline, which is free to employers and employees alike."

www.hrdept.co.uk/slondon.htm

— PEOPLE —

FINDING BUSINESS FUNDING



DR STEPHEN BENICE is founder and director of BusinessFunding.co.uk, an independent provider of business funding research and information. His expertise includes in-depth knowledge of the practical issues affecting start-ups and small businesses looking to finance their growth.

"In these uncertain economic times, it is tough, but by no means impossible, to find funding for your business. To be successful, it is essential for a business to understand the range of financing options available and to pick the type that fits the situation best. There has been a long tradition of focusing on banks to raise finance, particularly in the

retail sector. However, despite recent news that the Chancellor is launching a £20bn government scheme to try to boost bank lending to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), banks are still shying away from lending to businesses where uncertainty exists. It's not impossible to get a bank loan, but it is hard – particularly if you're just setting up shop. The main alternative to loans is attracting an equity investor, ie someone who will take a stake in your company in return for their cash. Government schemes, such as the new Seed Enterprise Investment Scheme, which give generous tax break to investors in SMEs, has helped make this option more viable, although there is still the challenge of finding a suitable investor.

Either way, loan or investment, it is always difficult to persuade a finance provider to put cash into your business unless you can meet their specific investment or lending criteria. One key point is for your company to have a

concrete business plan. You should know exactly how and why you intend to utilise the money raised. Equity investors and banks often also require access to key figures and financial statements that verify the business' financial situation, which would include a profit and loss statement, balance sheets and details of your current or anticipated profit margins on the goods you sell. These figures and financial statements can be massively influential in a finance provider's decision-making process as, ultimately, they are looking for a financial return. Investors and loan providers also have a series of 'soft eligibility requirements'. For example, they prefer businesses that have a management team in place that are knowledgeable in their sector. In retail, this may mean demonstrating that your team understands customers' needs and can grasp retail and fashion trends.

Loans and equity investment aside, business owners should also be aware of alternative finance arrangements that exist. The most applicable for retail are Asset Finance and Merchant Cash Advances. Asset Finance is a catch-all term, covering a number of business funding options that all involve the physical assets of your business. More common forms of Asset Finance include hire purchase agreements, asset-backed loans and various leasing options. The common aim is to improve your business' cash flow by releasing the cash that would otherwise be tied up in its physical assets. This could be applied to retail businesses by re-financing exiting equipment or, perhaps, financing the entire fit-out of a new outlet. Finally, Merchant Cash Advances are an arrangement whereby your business sells a proportion of its future debit/credit card sales to a finance company in return for an up-front payment. The agreement is limited so that once the finance company has received the pre-agreed repayment amount, your repayments cease. Such arrangements can improve the cash flow position of your business, reducing the level of funding you need from elsewhere."

www.BusinessFunding.co.uk

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Dr Graeme Codrington is a futurist, author and presenter. Director of strategic business planning website Tomorrowtoday.uk.com, he researches the disruptive forces that are changing the world, and will subsequently affect how people work.

"Fundamental and deep structural change is happening at multiple levels of society, politics and economics. Successful companies will find ways to be strategically responsive. To do this, everyone – at every level of your organisation – must have an understanding of the forces that will shape the next decade. You can develop these insights through regular analysis of your environment and strategic conversations throughout your organisation. Provide a framework for your teams that gets them to look at your company through the filter of the most disruptive forces bringing change to your business. The most famous model is PEST, which looks at Political, Economic, Social and Technological change drivers. My company's Strategic Insights team also suggests a model we call TIDES, which covers Technology, Institutional change, Demographics, the Environment and Social values, and our research shows there are five forces most likely to change the shape of every industry, especially retail, in the near future.

Technology – will change the way people look for information, who they trust for advice and assistance and how they connect with you. Institutional change – the rules for success and failure in your industry. From legislation and regulations to the cultural "way things are done around here" in your company, all of these are changing. Demographics – there are more young people with different expectations and world views, but also many older people who are choosing to 're-tyre' instead of retire, and are the richest, healthiest and

'youngest' old people the world has ever known. Our customer – and staff – age spread is as wide as it has ever been, with more divergent world views than ever. Environment – very soon, the 'ethical consumer' will be back in our stores. Retailers who source ethically will have the edge in the future. Social values – what people expect from life and what they consider to be normal, right and good – are changing. You need to understand these societal shifts and decide where you stand, as no-one is exempt from taking a position these days.

Give each force to different team members, and ask them to track this force and its implications for your business for a year. Allow them half an hour a week to do some investigative work. Allocate time at team meetings for each trend (one per month for just 15 minutes) and listen to what they have found out. Create electronic forums (such as a blog), where people can submit ideas and insights. Regularly publish the best of these (and some of the craziest, too) and invite interaction. Do all of this not only with staff, but with some trusted outsiders who are fans. Too often we jump into the 'what?' and 'how?' of change, without stepping back first to ask 'why?' Success is not guaranteed, but this is a great starting point for making the most of turbulent times."

www.graemecodrington.com / www.tomorrowtoday.uk.com

