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## Applying Retail Concepts to the Web

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August 2007 - Lisa Rummler

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Of all the things the Internet has done to improve the way we live, one of the top ways has to be shopping. From sneakers to cereal, you can buy pretty much anything online, and you can do so in the comfort of your home, wearing pajamas and eating cookie dough out of a bowl.

But if a retailer's Web site is not easy to navigate, or if it doesn't incorporate integral aspects of a brick-and-mortar store, the convenience of online shopping is canceled out.

That's where Web experts come in, such as Mike Maddaloni, president of Dunkirk Systems a Chicago-based consulting firm that delivers Internet solutions.

In helping retail customers develop their Web sites, Maddaloni said he tries to position himself as a sort of business adviser with a vested interest in the

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companies.

"I've been fortunate to bring a lot of customers to the Internet for the first time, and a lot of them have been established businesses," he said. "I tell them that they're the subject-matter experts — they know their business, they know their industry, they know their customers. They might not necessarily know how their customers are using the Internet, and that's where any Internet professional should be able to come in and help them."

Accordingly, Maddaloni said the Web professional or professionals working on a retailer's site must have a firm grasp of what it does (that is, what it sells) and the elements that define that particular retailer or make it stand out from its competitors.

"I try to understand their business as best as possible, whether it's going into their facility or just sitting down with them," he said. "I have some of my clients' products in my office because I want to know what they are, what they're doing and how they want to portray that on the Internet. A lot of times, people forget that element of it when they're coming in."

Additionally, Maddaloni said the Web provides a way for retailers to replicate what goes on in their stores, but it's important to take it to the next level.

"The Internet is a tool — it can be another channel," he said. "There are a lot of things from the day-to-day business of how a retailer is working that apply to the Internet. Then, it's a matter of, 'How does it work with regard to the Internet?' For example, we'll synchronize coupon codes or discount programs so that a client can carry that through to their Web site."

The application of some retail concepts differs on the Internet, however, including pricing — the Web levels the playing field, so to speak.

"Some physical stores in one location or one part of the country could have one price of something as compared with another physical location that has a different price," Maddaloni said. "There's a little more transparency with the Internet because companies that have tried different methods of having certain pricing in different areas, whether they're using cookies or detecting the IP address, and they've been called on that."

The 24x7 nature of the Internet, although convenient for customers, can force retailers to staff call centers long after malls have closed for the day — another element of e-commerce brick-and-mortar retailers must keep in mind, Maddaloni said.

And if a retailer is known for its customer service, it must replicate that to the best of its abilities online, making customers feel welcome.

"There are ways to personalize the experience: You can welcome someone back. You can offer them suggested products based on what they've purchased in the past. You can provide things such as the ability for them to see what they've ordered in the past, once they've logged in. If it's something they purchase frequently, you can offer the ability where they could either reorder what they've ordered in the past or set up a recurring order," Maddaloni said. "And even if you don't go to that extreme of offering those types of things, you can still use the design and layout of your site so that it's not hard for someone to do business with you — a person doesn't have to click too many times, that you offer a search of your products by keyword or a description."

Further, the Internet allows retailers the opportunity to improve themselves in ways that are not possible with brick-and-mortar stores, which ultimately is an advantage for customers.

"If you go into Target once a week, Target doesn't necessarily know that

you're shopping there once a week," he said. "When you go back to a Web site for a merchant, if you log in and set a cookie, the merchant has a greater knowledge of the person, that he or she has 'come in.' You are able to offer additional discounts, additional products. Even if you're at a smaller store, if you have different staff that work different days of the week, they don't necessarily remember the customers. With the Web site, you have that ability through the knowledge of their past ordering, the knowledge of their order habits.

"There are a lot of ways to track users through a Web site — not just for the particular transaction but looking at, over time, hits to a Web site, overall usage by all users, etc. You can see how effective your store is. Are there certain products people are not buying? Are there certain sections of your Web site people are not visiting? Is because of low interest, or is it because people are unable to find that item? Those are improvements to your e-commerce store that you might not be able to make to your retail, brick-and-mortar store, unless people are asking, or if different clerks or employees are not tracking that information. That gives you a sort of centralized way of tracking the effectiveness of your e-commerce store."

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