

Expand your online business offline

According to recent findings from Forrester Research Inc., online retail sales grew to more than \$210 billion in 2006. Although this is great news for many online businesses, this number represents only a small slice of a very large pie. In the U.S., the retail industry netted \$4 trillion in sales last year.

If you're looking to take a piece of that giant retail sales volume, it may be time for your online business to add a corresponding storefront. If this is your thinking, you're not alone. Even virtual mega-stores run by Amazon® and Dell® are extending their reach with the help of bricks and mortar partners, Target® and Wal-Mart® respectively. And virtual financial services company, President's Choice Financial®, makes its offline presence known via kiosks housed in many Loblaws® locations. There, representatives and ATMs act as physical reminders of this business' digital footprint. In the world of online commerce, the underlying message is clear: grow or be left behind.

Consumer behaviour is driving this need. The Digital Future Report by the USC-Anneberg School Center for the Digital Future has found that 69 percent of survey respondents say they will browse in traditional retail environments prior to making an online purchase. And 75 percent of respondents claim they first browse online and then purchase at a store. (Many respondents claim they take both actions.)

Opening a physical location to grow an established online business can be a great way to offer convenience and provide another point of contact with your customer. It can also help you gain a competitive advantage over other online businesses, and support growing demand for your products and services.

Adding a physical location enables you to build relationships with your customers. By spending time getting to know them, you'll gain a better understanding of their needs and provide them with improved service — offline and online.

Below are some tips to help you set up your new location.

Getting started.

Setting up a new location can seem like starting your business from scratch. Whether you rent or purchase the space, a substantial investment is usually required, and can include acquiring equipment, staff and inventory. Consider the nature of your business and the condition of the premises, as you may need to either renovate and upgrade electrical and plumbing requirements, or simply install shelving and display cases.

Consider hiring a designer to make the most of your space so it's easier for customers to find what they need easily, and feel welcome. Think of ways you can use your new space to support your physical location and online business. For example, can you use your physical location to store inventory from your store and for online distribution?

Offer in-store advantages.

One way to encourage customers to start thinking of your business as a physical presence is to provide benefits at your location that they can't get on your Web site. From insurance and mortgages to carpet cleaning and beyond, your products or services can benefit from one-on-one contact with potential clients at your retail location. Storefront tactics also apply here, so consider offering discounts for new clients or implementing specials that are valid from your location only.

With service businesses, quality take-away materials, such as brochures or catalogues, are important. Ensure that your location is well stocked with materials that provide more information on your services. These brochures and catalogues will also serve as visual, tactile reminders of the excellent customer service provided at your location.

If you're selling products, sensory experiences add to the appeal of being able to walk into a physical location. At a retail location, for example, customers can try food samples and fragrant body care products, try on clothing or try out sports equipment. This gives them the opportunity to evaluate products and find exactly what they need.

Spread the word.

A grand opening can attract your online customers and new customers into your new storefront. Advertise this event and your new address and contact information on your Web site. Advertising on YellowPages.ca™ and listing your company on the Bell Business Directory can also help customers find you easily. Include online coupons that can be redeemed for introductory specials at your location. You can also distribute e-coupons in a monthly email or newsletter to encourage in-store redemption and drive traffic.

Cross-promotion at your store can also help new customers become familiar with online ordering. Inform walk-in customers about your Web store by including it on business cards and in-store advertising. Let customers know about upcoming specials in-store and online by collecting email addresses. You can also provide added convenience for your customers by allowing them to order online and pick up or return items in-store. Service businesses also benefit from having a knowledgeable staff member in-store for that personal touch in dealing with client questions and service issues on the spot.

Choose Bell for help at your new physical location.

If you're ready to take your business from a virtual storefront to a physical location, Bell can help. Bell can assist you with your Information and Communication Technology (ICT) set-up needs for your new location, including phone and Internet access for processing your customers' Web orders and supporting your POS terminal. Accelerated Installation* service from Bell can help you get connected quickly and conveniently. Once you've ordered the service, you can expect to have it installed as soon as the next day.

All in all, opening a physical location to support your online business will give your customers the best of both worlds: the convenience of Internet transactions and the appeal of in-person shopping.

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