

Never mind the product, do your customers trust you?

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A PROFESSIONAL business image is what counts when attracting customers.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand why but achieving it is another matter entirely.

What's more, research commissioned by Microsoft UK reveals that 75% of people in Yorkshire think that it's more important than ever for a local business to appear professional.

More than 85% of respondents believe that a competent image conveys a good quality service with 65% saying that it gives a sense of honesty and trustworthiness.

Of those surveyed in Yorkshire, 60% said they would be more likely to use a small business if they have a professional looking website and email address.

For most people, a well designed website conveys greater accessibility (55%), professionalism (46%) and clarity (47%) about what the business offers. Significantly, 94% consumers will check a business' website before deciding whether to purchase goods or services from that company.

And it seems that any potential pitfalls are in the detail. More than eight in 10 people said that they were likely to choose a local supplier that used a business email address as opposed to a personal one. In fact, more than half admitted to shunning local firms that use a personal email address, confirming the consumer attitude that image is everything.

Tim Kimber, Office Live product manager, Microsoft UK, says that a firm's online presence - be that through its website or email contact - is a vital factor in conveying professionalism.

"It's particularly important that we look to rid the small business world of personal email, which doesn't communicate the level of professionalism small firms need.

"If local businesses are to grow and compete with larger companies, they need to understand just how important it is to appear professional. They should think about their online presence very carefully and understand how the design of their website and email address affects how their business is perceived."



To help SMEs achieve a professional online presence, Microsoft offers Office Live Small Business - a piece of free web-based software, which allows small firms to promote and manage their business online. Customer relationship management (CRM) tools - previously a luxury only afforded to firms with healthy IT budgets - help them achieve corporate Nirvana - customer loyalty.

"Although a professional business image is important in attracting new customers, customer relationship management is critical to ensuring your customers return," Kimber continues.

"You need to make each and every customer feel important to the business, no matter how they interact with your business. New technologies such as Office Live allow small, local firms access to the tools that larger companies have been using for years to build an effective customer database and achieve the customer loyalty needed for business growth and success."

The power and future of e-commerce shouldn't be underestimated. Each year the figures grow and experts are predicting that the current financial crisis will drive even more people to the internet as they browse for a bargain.

However, research shows that a staggering 77% of firms are using their website to provide information only to customers and thus missing out on sales opportunities that can expand their business and drive revenue.

The IMRG CapGemini e-Retail Sales Index showed that in February an equivalent of £69 was spent online for every person in the UK - a year-on-year increase of 46%. Given the fact that now more than before consumers are purchasing a record amount of goods online there's a big opportunity for small businesses to increase sales and grow their customer base.

According to a recent Opus research survey, online marketing techniques remain underutilised because small business owner managers fear they can't afford it - with 20% believing that internet marketing is too complex and 15% believing that they don't have the manpower to manage it correctly.

There are other key elements such as aesthetic appeal, ease of navigation, and payment assurance. PayPal is probably the UK's best known e-commerce functionality, but it offers benefits other than a secure payment transaction such as use of gift certificates.

Swanland-based Les Parfums d'Isabelle is one small online business that has fully taken advantage of all the tools on offer to make its website as professional as possible.

The firm, which creates and sells perfumes that are composed only of natural essential oils, was created by Isabelle Gellé after she realised that there was a gap in the UK perfume market and decided to take advantage of it by utilising her hobby to make a business.

"I started doing it when I was ten years old as a hobby and my passion, but, in my adult years, I decided to turn it into a business as I realised that there is a big gap in the natural perfume businesses in the UK," explains Gelle.

"This is one of the countries in Europe where perfume is not as popular. Because it is a niche market and we are currently in the green trend, I decided to go into it with my natural perfume."

One of the challenges that Les Parfums d'Isabelle faced as a small online business was visibility and transparency of the product.

"Because it is an internet business and not a retail store, the major challenge was and is making sure that the customer understands that they can get quality products via the internet even though they are not able to see or smell them," continues Gelle.

"I am not worried though, because the internet is becoming a popular tool for purchasing, I can see my business increasing."

After registering with a number of business forums Gelle got wind of Microsoft Office Live. Although she trusted the brand, she was still a little sceptical, but on seeing the benefits and the IT giant's "good intentions" she signed up.

She says that implementation was relatively quick and the tools easy to use, although she says that a little bit of HTML coding knowledge would enable a user to prettify the site.

Gelle is now looking to expand her business with the launch of a second website to attract corporate businesses.

However, looks aren't everything and although a professional image is vital in getting people to buy from a local business in the first place, Microsoft's survey found that it's good customer service and after sales care that ensure customers return, with 43% of respondents expressing that good service is the number one factor in using a business again.

Nearly all respondents agreed that after sales care is important in deciding whether or not to revisit a local business. Significantly, 64% of people admitted that they are deterred from using the same company again if they've experienced poor after sales care.

Technology may be revolutionising the way we buy and sell, but evidence shows that traditional values still remain core to any business success. Forget these to your peril.