

PUNCH IT UP A NOTCH BY CHRISTIAN CLAYTON

Virtual Presence

Does Your Web Site Exemplify Your Business?

WITH GAS STILL EXPENSIVE AND A SLOWING economy, people are hesitant to spend money. And if they do, it's often from home. Are you and your business prepared for this change in the retail market? If your web site is not in top form, then the answer to that question is a resounding no.



Christian Clayton is president of Sucker Punch Sally's, Formula Customs, and SPS Beverage. Christian graduated from Brooks Institute with a degree in motion picture and photography. He has over 12 years of experience running a top-40 Ford dealership and three years running Sucker Punch Sally's.

No matter how good you are at what you do, if your web site doesn't accurately portray your skills, many people will never know. A web site can be the defining feature of a business, but, unfortunately, business people usually invest the least amount of time and money in this area. When they build a site, they usually pay a one-time fee for something basic or have their computer-savvy nephew build something they never update. This approach won't cut it in today's economy.

Take this example: I have a good friend who owns a cell-phone company. His company handles large corporate accounts, and its staff is incredible at what they do. The owners are young, hungry, and specialize in top-notch customer service. When you or I have a problem with our phones, we call customer service; wait 30 minutes, talk to a stranger, get disconnected, call back, and start all over again. But when his customers — Fortune 500 companies — call, they get outstanding tech support from the same person again and again.

These guys don't hesitate to fly or drive out to resolve customers' issues firsthand, which is unheard of in the industry. Their office walls are lined with testimonials praising their good work, and their sales are over \$2 million a year.

But here's the kicker: you wouldn't know any of this from the company web site. So when my friend told me the site had been built for only \$3,000, I had to be honest. "No offense," I told him. "But it looks like it."

Instead of the profiles, videos, pictures, and testimonials I should have seen, there was a corporate cookie-cutter site with sterile, stock photos; no personality; and no information about the company's accomplishments.

We started to break down his monthly expenses, including rent, utilities, salaries, etc., and discovered that he spends less on the Internet than anything else. You get what you pay for in this area, and a well-designed, interesting site will cost money. But in 2009, with more and more people online, you can't conduct business without a stellar web site, so it should be a top priority when it comes to marketing expenses. You may successfully bring people

to your web site through standard advertising, but if they aren't interested when they get there, you've lost their business. A poor web site can be your worst enemy, because it will drive people away.

When designing your site, make sure it has the key elements in place. It should be easy to navigate. Don't make people go on a treasure hunt to find something. High-quality photography is also essential. If you have any doubt in your photographic skills, find or hire someone to shoot your pictures. You won't sell that killer bike in your shop with mediocre photos.

Use the site as a place to let people know what's happening in your business. If you host an event, document it. Take good pictures and keep the events photo section updated regularly. People love to see themselves on the Internet, and good photos of an event will make people want to come to the next one. When you sell a bike, take a picture of the new owner with the bike and put it up on the site. When you run a special on parts or service, make sure it's the first thing people see when they log on.

The bottom line: keep your web site fresh, have high-quality photos and pay a professional to lay the groundwork. A bad web site will never get better if you don't have a good foundation to build on.

Once you've got the basics in place, know how to update the site and keep track of how many visitors you have. Several places online will tell you how much time people spend on your site, how many unique visitors you have each month, and how many pages people visit. Some say the national average for time on a site is less than 1 minute. People spend an average of 14 minutes on www.SuckerPunchSallys.com, and we attribute that to the fact that we keep things interesting with hundreds of high-quality photos and several professional-grade videos. We do our best to regularly update the site with new photos from the events and rallies we go to, and we get tons of customer submissions that we upload regularly.

In terms of what you'll need to spend on a web site, spend as much as you need to give people a feel for your company, what you do, and what makes your shop special. It's hard to spend money in a down market, but this is the time you need to spend the most. It's easy to spend when things are great, but it's a must to spend when things are not. Your web site is the place to start. **MSR**