Make Your Store Sell!

Everything You Need To Know To Build A Profitable Online Store

by Ken Evoy

1. Introduction

The Web, when properly used, is the ultimate niche marketing-and-selling vehicle. The possibilities of what to sell on the Net are limited only by your ability to either...

1) Make products of value to consumers, or...

2) Source interesting valuable products and present them in a way that causes visitors to buy.

E-tailing is the ideal shopping situation. There are lots of reasons "why" this is so but the top reasons really zero in on the key benefits...

For online shoppers, **convenience** (wherever and whenever they want to shop!), **access to a broader selection of products** and the ease of **comparison shopping** are the top advantages over offline shopping.

What about for you, the small business owner?

The world becomes your potential audience and customer! As a result, it's much easier to **expand your customer base.** E-commerce flexibility leads nicely into the second main advantage. The same way that your customer base is no longer dependent on location, your store can **operate from anywhere** as well -- from your basement, or workshop, or art studio, or garage, or warehouse, or offline retail store... or even through some other company's location (if you have set up a drop shipping arrangement).

As an SBIer, you already have a head start over your competitors. You know that the key to success is not to get caught up by the false promise of "immediate, instant" gratification of getting a site up, adding a shopping cart and collecting money. A real business takes real work. A shopping cart is just a tool.

You understand e-commerce reality...

A thriving, sustainable store depends on a growing traffic base of targeted PREsold visitors. And the most affordable and efficient way to build this type of traffic is by following the SBI! process...

CONTENT ➡ **TRAFFIC** ➡ **PREsell** ➡ **MONETIZE**

Since it is the key to your online success, let's start our store-building discussion with where you are in the process right now.

At this point, you have done the heavy lifting, the **C** ➡ **T** ➡ **P** part. Your SBI! site is attracting targeted traffic and PREselling these visitors on a daily basis. Now you can begin to monetize this PREsold traffic through your store. The next part, by comparison, is much easier than the first. Why is that?

PREsold targeted traffic tends to convert at a much higher percentage rate.
In other words, a visitor who first reads your high quality, informative content on your SBI! site before being forwarded to your online store to purchase a related product is much more likely to buy than if she went directly to your store from a Pay-Per-Click or other advertising campaign. Your content has already warmed her up to your sales message and solutions.

Many of your competitors follow the wrong process (unfortunate for them, but fortunate for you!). They put the shopping cart before the **C** ➡ **T** ➡ **P** e-horse.

Web stores, by their very nature, tend to focus on selling (i.e., features) rather than on PREselling (i.e., benefits). It's difficult to build a trusting "open-to-buy" mindset in your visitor based on product descriptions and SELL-SELL-SELL.

You, on the other hand, are "doing" the right process in the right order. As a result, you have pre-qualified your online store venture, which in turn minimizes your risk. You have an interested audience... prospective customers that already know and trust you. Everything is in place for you to "close the deal" (i.e., "sell").

What a profitable advantage over your competitors!

But before we continue, a few words of cautious advice...

Do not make the mistake of rushing too quickly into the hard goods monetization model. The key is to monetize your traffic in a way that **best fits** with your business blueprint.

Ask yourself this question...

> Would my profit margin be significantly higher than what I would earn through other less demanding monetization models (i.e., affiliate programs, Google's AdSense program, finder-referrer fees, and so on)?

Sourcing, selling, packing and shipping products (or drop-shipping), receiving payments, and dealing with customer service issues require a much higher level of commitment to your online business than, let's say, participating in a few choice affiliate programs and running AdSense ads on your Web site. In many cases, you may be able to make as much or more income from your Web site without the hassles of stocking or shipping anything.

SBI! Resources HQ recommends several viable alternatives that let you "collect the money." A bit of experimentation will save you undue expense and effort, should you find that selling hard goods is either not profitable or takes too much of your time.

A final point that I can't stress or repeat often enough...

Monetization is always the final step of the **C** ➡ **T** ➡ **P** ➡ **M** process. There is simply no other way around it.

OK, let's examine the "big picture" of this monetization model before we tackle specific aspects, point by point...

2. A Solid Foundation

Online stores have a unique position. Just like in a real world store, people come in to look around and maybe buy something. However, unlike a bricks-and-mortar store, there's **no physical contact.** No one can squeeze the bread, smell the leather, or drive the car. You can't see your visitors and they can't see you.

So how do you overcome this interesting challenge? Two simple goals...

1) Become your customer. Make the needs of your customer your **primary focus** and your own desire to generate income secondary.

The Net is all about quick access and convenience. As a result, you don't have the luxury of face-to-face contact. But your PREselling site has built confidence at a slow comfortable pace. Your words must be your friendly, virtual, PRE-salesperson, smiling behind the counter or stationed helpfully in the aisle.

Your store completes the process.

That's why it's so important to develop a thumbnail sketch of your target or ideal customer *before* you begin to write any copy on your store. The key to maximizing sales is to offer products that address the unique needs of your audience as accurately as possible and that fit your site's theme. Visitors to your store should feel that you understand them and that your "solutions" can fulfill their wishes or ease their pain... at a price they can afford.

A good way to create a thumbnail sketch is to start asking yourself some simple questions. Is my "ideal customer"....

• young, middle-aged, or senior?

• predominantly male or female?

• financially secure or budget-minded?

• etc., etc.

Continue with more questions...

• What are some of the occupations my ideal customer might do?

• What leisure activities, does s/he like?

• What sort of demands is s/he dealing with?

Keep asking and jotting down answers and ideas until your sketch is as complete as you can make it. The better you know your customer, the more accurate your product sourcing and selection will be.

2) Create a store that instills confidence and continues to build upon the trust, credibility and goodwill developed by your site. The move from one to the other should be seamless, and give visitors an oh-so-comfortable feeling of familiarity... they can see that you have their best interests at heart wherever they go!

"Customer focus" and "confidence" make up the cornerstone of your store-building efforts. The strength of the rest of your foundation depends upon the following four theoretical principles...

- **Most Wanted Response (MWR)**

- **Unique Selling Proposition**

- **Your Store is Your Product**

- **Backup Response**

Let's begin with the first one...

2.1. The Most Wanted Response

What's the Most Wanted Response (MWR) of the typical online store? In other words, what do you most want your visitor to do when she arrives at your store?

Simple. It's...

"Buy something... anything!"

The "regular" online store owner wants her visitors (especially first-time visitors) who find her store through a promotional campaign to purchase something. After all, if these visitors don't buy, they may **never** be back. And the owner can kiss good-bye to those advertising dollars.

But for you, things are more positive (and profitable!) ...

Most visitors arrive at your store through your site and because of its effective PREselling content. Your visitors *already* know about you, your passions, your business -- you are credible in their minds. You have established a bond of trust with them and, as a result, you are no longer a stranger.

And, on top of those big pluses, your store products relate to the theme of your content site. They address a need or provide a solution that your visitors are seeking. This PREselling-to-selling seamless movement is essential.

Here's an example to illustrate this point...

Let's say that one of your Keyword-Focused Content Pages (KFCPs) on your Web site discusses the dangers of household air-borne pollution… **and** your visitor found this page by performing a related search query… **and** you deliver valuable content that addresses this issue. What will happen when you refer this particular visitor over to your store to buy a state-of-the-art air purifier?

Will she be more or less open-to-buy than the person who arrives directly to your store from an advertising campaign or the PPCs (Pay-Per-Click Search Engines)? The answer, of course, is obvious...

She will be very receptive to **your** sales message.

On the other hand, a visitor who arrives directly to your store from an ad has not had her questions or concerns answered yet -- the primary reason why she is searching on the Net. So in the case of our example above, she has no valid reason and/or strong motivation to own an air purifier. As a result, the chance of a sale is low.

> Important note**...**
>
> Because your site continues to build content that addresses the needs of your visitors, there is always a reason for your visitor to return to it. And when they do, you have another opportunity to re-introduce them to your store.

OK, now back to the MWR -- getting the sale.

How do you maximize your chances?

Target a specific audience and offer products related to their needs.

Your PREselling content has been building a "brand of one." Now offer unique, credible solutions that meet the needs and wishes of your visitors.

When visitors arrive at some online stores, they may not know where to begin -- there's too much happening at once. This is a sure sign of a business that can't or won't get out of its own mindset. The owner wants to put **everything** on the home page and, as a result, he presents nothing but a blur.

Why? **Because he forgot the customer.**

People buy with their emotions, not with their logic. Only benefits tap emotions.

Take-home lesson?

Benefits add to the perceived value of your products... the higher the perceived value, the greater the chance you have for a sale

So become you customer.   Work through the features of your products and figure out the benefits, while standing in your customer's shoes. For example...

• Does a certain feature save time, especially if someone is presently over-extended at work?

That's a benefit.

• Does a key feature encourage relaxation, just for the fun of it?

That's a benefit.

• Does another feature provide independence, a chance to make decisions for oneself?

That's a benefit.

Don't rush.   Really become your customer.   Get the mindset right and your sales copy will stay on the right track.

> It sounds like it should be simple to "become your customers." But it's the hardest thing to do. Why? Because you don't live in their world. So it's easy to slip back into yours.
>
> Put a yellow memo on your monitor right now that clearly says...
> **"Become my customer."**

The benefits list has a second function and this function is really just an extension of the first. It will help you create your **Unique Selling Proposition (USP)...**

2.2. Unique Selling Proposition

Your **Unique Selling Proposition** tells your reader what differentiates your store (i.e., your products) from your competitor.   It is your **single best benefit** that every visitor to your Web site will perceive as being unique to you.   It answers that critical question in his or her mind... "Why should I buy from you?"

Here's a simple exercise to help you develop your **USP,** building upon the benefit-related work you have already done...

1) Write down what your store provides and the features of the different products.

2) Review the list of key benefits that you created earlier. Can you clearly identify what pain your products cure, what solutions they provide?

3) Ask yourself what makes you stand out from the competition? Keep working on this until you can clearly separate yourself from the field. There must be a convincing reason for doing business with you, instead of your competitor.

4) Summarize all of the above into one tight, powerful, motivating phrase that will persuade your client to do business with you, to trade their money for the "solutions" you can deliver. You want your customer to think... "Your business is the **only** one for me."

Once you get it "just right," use your **USP** on your store's home page, in your sig file when you communicate with your visitors and customers, in your order confirmation e-mails, etc.... whenever and wherever you want to reinforce your uniqueness.

And that leads us smoothly to the third "foundation" concept...

2.3. The Store's The Product

The fantastic thing about having an online store is that **you don't necessarily have to sell your own products.** Actually, it's very likely that you won't!

As a store owner, instead of selling one or a few of your own products, you sell tens or hundreds (or at some point later on, thousands) of products that are produced by others. Naturally, since you're selling an extensive range of items, also known as SKUs (Stock Keeping Units), there's no way, as a small

business person with limited means, that you could develop and produce all those items.

So your key role is to be an aggregator!

An aggregator is someone who pulls many things together from many places and puts them together in such a way as to create something new, wonderful, and valuable. In a sense...

Your store is your product... it's what you sell to visitors. If they **"buy"** your store, they'll buy your products.

Ask yourself these important questions...

What makes your store stand apart from the zillions of others? What makes it unique? Is it the merchandise? The design and presentation? Atmosphere? Meticulous attention to customer service? All four?

Point is... there **must** be something unique about your store that sets you apart from your competitors. More than that, this differentiator must add **value** to your customer's shopping experience and make her more likely to choose you over a competitor.

Stroll through your local mall. Many merchants are in direct competition for your time, attention, eyes and money! Which ones stand out? The ones that make a difference to you.

There are other bottom-line reasons to be different as well. When you sell common products, the competition is intensive, and it's difficult to offer competitive prices. In addition, your store will not develop a unique feel. Instead, it becomes another <yawn> same-old/same-old destination that visitors will quickly exit.

Your goal is to create a store related to the theme of your site, and present your referred visitors with a unique and distinctive array of products.

This part is critical and worth repeating...

Your goal is to create a store related to the theme of your site.

Your site is already doing its job by attracting and growing an audience specifically targeted to your business or niche. To successfully monetize this traffic, your store offerings must also be the right fit.

While earning a 10-15% profit margin on a $5,000 plasma-screen T.V. certainly is appealing, your audience may be wondering why you are offering it to them if

your site is dedicated to the care of the family dog. What a huge turnoff, an unfortunate loss of opportunity and a tremendous waste of all your traffic-building, PREselling efforts to get targeted visitors to your site and then on to your store!

Feel free to be creative as you compile your product line, but always match your products with the needs, and interests of your visitors.

No match. No sales.

To summarize, your store is your product. Your visitors must "buy" it first before they will be willing to give up hard-earned cash for anything. So your store needs to...

• relate to the theme of your site

• offer a product selection that stands out from the crowd

• develop an engaging presentation that is customer-focused

• provide a user-friendly shopping experience that reinforces trust and credibility.

What if you are customer-focused, your store "fits" with your theme and your product line is unique but you don't make the sale right away? Good question! Answer? Have a "Plan B" ready...

2.4. The Backup Response

The concept of a **Backup Response** applies to online stores, just like it does for any other type of sales-oriented site. A good "Plan B" gives you a second chance to achieve your Most Wanted Response.

There can be many legitimate reasons why your visitor might not be ready to commit the first time around -- a week away from pay day, home distractions, not needed until summer, etc. And, sometimes, individual members of your target group may have slightly different needs and interests from the group as a whole.

So instead of just "writing her off as a lost cause," set up opportunities for you and your visitor to stay in touch, while providing repeat exposure to your business. Perhaps it's a monthly information-packed e-zine or newsletter or

an informative 5-day e-course, or a quarterly special report, or your RSS feed, or a blog. The goal is to build a relationship with her. Help her to learn to like and trust you.

You can't please everyone all the time but you can at least get people to come back to see what's new, in both your site and store. And then, when the timing is right for her (financially, psychologically, etc.), you can easily make the sale -- your MWR.

Bottom line?

It's always easier for visitors to come to **their own conclusion** that they need your products than it is for you to convince them of that through straight selling efforts. Backup Responses play an important role in bringing visitors to that profitable conclusion.

As an SBIer, you once again have a unique advantage over your competitors. Your site and your store are partners. A Backup Response that benefits one, benefits the other. Talk about leveraging your time and efforts!

For example... you put time into creating an excellent newsletter, knowing that it will increase your site's credibility and keep it on your customer's radar screen. By association, your newsletter has the same positive effect on your store and it didn't cost you any extra effort!

Here's another one...

Using **Form Build It!**, you create a special contest registration form on your site. Each month, a winner is chosen and the prize is any product under $25 in your store.   This creative Backup Response lures your visitors back to your store and your site. One contest... two visits!

> There is an additional benefit happening here...
>
> By doing this type of Backup Response (or a product survey, or "Got A Question About A Product" form, etc.), on your site, you are not distracting your visitor from delivering your store's MWR... buying something!

One more -- I saved the best until last....

Your site is also your store's biggest Backup Response (and leverage!) It...

• establishes your credibility, knowledge and credentials

• demonstrates your commitment to the **"give then take"** philosophy (i.e., you meet the needs of your customers first and then work to get the sale).

• further imprints on the visitor's mind that your Web site is the authority and the place to go online for information on a specific theme

• "warms up" your visitors to your monetization offerings.

After all that, who wouldn't make a repeat visit to your store?

> And, of course, your site gives you another advantage over regular stores... other monetization models. If your visitors don't buy, they may click on Google AdSense ads, an affiliate link, etc., etc.

At this point, it may sound like this partnership is pretty one-sided but it doesn't have to be...

Use your store to enhance your Backup Response efforts on your site. How? These three ways spring to mind immediately...

• Some visitors may arrive at your store directly from the PPCs or advertising campaigns -- no reason for you not to selectively boost traffic even more! As a result, you are a stranger to them. By encouraging visitors to visit your site and/or sign up to your newsletter, you help the unfamiliar ones around this potential hurdle.

• Backup Responses can never have too much exposure. These days, strategies like newsletters, e-courses, and special reports are commonly used, so it may take several exposures before a visitor recognizes your uniqueness and takes action (MWR action, that is). Your store provides an additional location to present your sign-up form.

• Encourage newsletter subscriptions by offering a store special...

`Subscribe to our newsletter and...`
`receive 15% off your first purchase with us!`

Keep in mind that a Backup Response can also capitalize on the appeal of a bargain. Who can resist a bargain? I certainly can't!

Offer a super deal on something -- a sale, a closeout, a special "Buy 2, Get 1 Free" blitz. Yes, the offline use of "specials" works online, too. Do whatever it takes to get your Most Wanted Response.

Take-home lesson?

Think "partnership" and creative ideas will follow!

> Once visitors begin to use the subscription form at your site, adjust your newsletter so that it references your store. You don't want to ignore

> those subscribers who originated from your store.   And it gives you an opportunity to introduce your site-generated subscribers to your store products.
>
> It's a fine line between "referencing/introducing" your products and "selling" your products. Keep your focus on highly informative newsletter articles and you won't cross that line.

Understand these four simple but powerful concepts -- "Most Wanted Response," "Unique Selling Proposition," "Your Store Is Your Product" and "Backup Response" -- and you are off in the right direction... an upward, sales-generating direction, of course.

3. Key Building Blocks

Your store foundation is completed. Now you can start building a secure framework, block by block...

3.1. Sourcing and Building a Product Line

Do you already have a good idea about what you will be selling? If that's the case and you have your own inventory ready to go, please skip ahead to the next chapter.

If you don't, that leads to this important question...

Will you stock and ship inventory, or will you drop-ship the products you sell?

Unless you produce what you plan to sell online, you probably do not want to carry inventory. There are many reasons why this situation is not appealing. First of all, stocking a comprehensive product line requires a significant cash outlay -- one far beyond the means of the average individual or small business. You also need to store that inventory somewhere. And then when an order arrives... you must pack it and ship it. Big minuses.

Investigate the drop-shipping option as a potential alternative. With drop-shipping, you feature items on your Web site, but you do not stock them. When an order comes in, you process the credit card, and forward the order to your drop-shipper, who packages the product and ships it to your customer. You then pay the drop-shipper a wholesale fee for the product, pocketing the difference between that fee and what you charged your customer as profit.

The benefits of drop-shipping are obvious -- since no inventory is required, you are free to offer a much more comprehensive product line to your visitors.

Drop-shipping arrangements can also be quite flexible, depending upon the relationship you build with the product producer or supplier. For example, you and a local artisan might agree that you take the orders and address customer service issues, and she looks after all shipping concerns.

For more details on the merits of drop-shipping, please read the short article found at...

http://mhq.sitesell.com/drop-shipping.html

What if you are a natural sleuth and would rather do your own researching? Actually, it's fairly easy to source your own product line.

1) Begin with...

Thomas Register
http://www.thomasregister.com/

The Thomas Register is enough, all by itself, to build your online store inventory. But as a small business, go that extra step. Try to aggregate unusual, high-quality goods as much as you can.   The extra time you spend on sourcing will pay off down the line. Remember, your "product" is your store and a sharp, esoteric offering is important.

2) Here's how to find more potential suppliers. Do a search at Google for "Thomas Register" **(with the quotes).** You're not looking for Thomas Register. You already know where that is. This search will…

• Show Google's cache of thomasregister.com.
• Find Web pages that are similar to thomasregister.com.
• Find Web pages that link to thomasregister.com.
• Find Web pages that contain the term "thomasregister.com."

3) Focus on a specific industry**.** Call the relevant manufacturer's association and/or attend trade fairs.

Here's a good place to start for trade shows. The whole site is outstanding...

International Business Resources on the WWW
http://ciber.msu.edu/

4) Explore worldwide sourcing.

Global Edge
http://globaledge.msu.edu/resourceDesk/

5) Follow links**.** Whenever you find a good source, use Alexa to find other related sites.

6) Check locally**.** Is there a local-goes-global nearby flea market with some terrific local artisans? Aggregate them into a cool, online store. Do you have a friend with an offline gallery or retail operation? Be partners and run the online division.

Is your area famous for anything? Wines, soap-stone carvings, smoked salmon... be the one who spreads the word about local riches.

Here's the bottom line...

You **can** put a product line together. Find products that relate to your business niche **and** that would interest your targeted visitors. Then assemble your products in a sharp, new and fun way. (More on presentation in the coming chapters.)

Take your time here. **"Prepare... Don't Repair"** applies to prospective store owners 1,000%. The time you spend finding "just right" products will repay you one hundred fold.

Quick tip...

You are bound to discover some great little suppliers in this sourcing stage. **When you do...**

                    ... don't tell a soul.

Your sources are your gold -- don't give them away.

To build upon what I said earlier...

Your store is your product. Shouldn't **you** put strong efforts into getting **your** store just right? This is the single most important step in building an online store.

OK, let's turn our attention to a second building block...

3.2. Photos... Seeing Is Believing

A picture is worth 1,000 words. For online stores, increase that value to 10,000! It's easy to understand why there is such a big jump...

Your visitors **cannot** touch your physical product. Worse still, they can't try it out -- in real stores, people slip on sweaters... test-drive cars... sample the grapes (when no one's looking). In France, they even get to taste the wine!

So you must help your visitors **feel the benefits** and make an emotional connection. Photos are the perfect tool to achieve these results. When you are

building your store, select photos that show people **using** your product -- wearing the clothes you sell, driving the car, enjoying the succulent grapes, drinking the wine... on a terrace in Paris... at sunset!

Here are some useful pointers to get you started...

• As you source each product, ask the supplier for photos -- most have them in digital format, sized, reduced and ready to go. This makes your life all the easier.

• Get samples of each product as quickly as possible. Then start photographing them.

• You need some basic graphic software that can re-size your photos…

http://sbitips.sitesell.com/treating-images-for-web.html

http://sbitips.sitesell.com/image-resize-mac.html

• Prepare **thumbnail versions** -- users will click on an accompanying link to see your full-sized photo. These small pictures, which require very little in the way of bandwidth, allow visitors to quickly scan your product line. Thumbnails also show a respect for your visitor's time.

A visitor can go from this size...

To this size...

Learning the basics of graphic software as it pertains to reducing graphics properly requires a small investment of time, but it is completely do-able.

Next building block? Your "words"...

3.3. Write Words That SELL!

Copywriting is a skill. Results are skill-dependent. Generally, writing sales copy for online stores is far simpler, and yet the skill becomes more critical, because stores sell many items and that means you just don't have the room to build a long story.

However, in your case, things are a little different -- once again.

C ➡ T ➡ P ➡ M gives you the capability to introduce and expand upon your product benefits outside the somewhat space-restrictive format of a typical online store. Here's why...

Your site is full of high-value, PREselling content related to your theme. As your visitor clicks directly from your site to your store, she is "open-to-buy" as she reads about the product's benefits and features.

Still, it is important that your product descriptions contain enough **benefits** for them to stand on their own.

Why is this necessary?

Some individuals may arrive directly to your store via an ad or a Pay-Per-Click campaign. Others may have come from your site without having read any of

your PREselling content. They may be "just browsing" so your descriptions need to attract, slow down their skimming eyeballs and make some sort of connection.

Many store owners focus their sales copy exclusively on **features,** with no references to benefits at all. That's a big mistake. While product features must be included in your description, always remember...

Benefits sell... not features.

A typical approach to "selling" is one that you probably recognize...

`"I have a lot of stuff to show you.  I hope you pick one."`

All too often, store owners create some fancy home pages, and then resort to a database-focused strategy, i.e., show product after product after product, as requested, with meager description, **until the customer...**

        ... dies of boredom.

The good news? If you make **any** effort at writing decent sales copy, you will have better results than 99% of online stores.

Here are the three most important things to keep firmly planted in your brain while building the copy for your store...

1) Become your customer. That mindset virtually guarantees your success as a copywriter.

2) Benefits first, then features. Features tell your visitor what the product is and what it does. Benefits answer what "pain" it cures, or what "gain" it delivers.

3) Don't ignore the subtext. "Text" is what the words say. **"Subtext"** is what's underneath -- what is said "between the lines." It's the hidden message.

It's also what separates the scam artists from the "real McCoys." Because it's very hard to fake.

If you write shrill hype like all the scam artists do, it smells of "get rich quick." But subtext can give away other situations as well.

Subtext is probably the single hardest part of copywriting to master. Even if you're pure of heart, the wrong subtext can hurt your effort. For example, if your copy tries too hard, **the subtext says...**

... "I'm desperate -- **please, please buy my product."**

It's on to the next building block... how you greet your customer at your "front door"...

3.4. Write A Winning Opener

The home page, and especially the opening paragraph, can make or break every sales site -- yes, even for SBIers. Your customers may arrive at your store with a PREsold mindset but you can easily destroy it with a poor first impression.

Your opener must instill prospective customers with confidence, entice them to move forward, and give them a good idea of what your store offers. For those arriving directly from a search query, they will judge you and your offerings based upon your opening paragraph.

As the saying goes...

You don't get a second chance to make a good first impression!

This is not as critical for big companies like Macy's or Amazon.com or Wal-Mart, since they already have brand name recognition. But it **is** critical for your business, and any other small or startup online store or mall.

As an SBIer with PREsold visitors, it's much easier, of course. Your store's home page smoothly does the transition from a PREselling to a selling environment. It's much tougher for a standalone store, with no content depth or other ways to monetize.

Even larger companies should make an effort to get that first paragraph just right. Most of them simply assume that everyone knows them, so the "big guys" don't see the need for a great opening paragraph that reinforces their Unique Selling Proposition (USP).

That's a mistake. Companies that have "household-name" notoriety can make the opener much shorter. But to leave out a "get-your-attention" opener completely in order to get straight to business is an opportunity wasted. On the Net, you want every encounter with your visitor/potential customer (from beginning to end) to be sterling and of course, productive.

If you don't, your *competitor* will happily do so!

To understand why, let's review two important points from a bit earlier...

1) The Most Wanted Response of an online store is... "Buy something... anything!"

2) Once you set your MWR, design your entire store towards getting it. Every word you write, every graphic you include, every photo you highlight, should be chosen to increase your odds of getting the MWR. Even though your site's content has PREsold your prospects, don't foolishly assume they will arrive at your store and pull out their credit card right away.

A great opening paragraph that fires your USP-gun is absolutely fundamental. It's the first important step to getting your customer to buy something.

Always start by finishing your PREselling efforts -- sell the customer on the idea of doing business with you.

Let's take a whack at it...

Golf Moments For You

Golf... from **sublime** to **ridiculous**... from shot to shot!

It's a sport that is filled with memorable moments...

· exaltation and triumph

· agony and frustration

· romance and mysticism

GolfFig.YourGolfDomain.com captures it all... golfing moments frozen in plaster, wood, marble, even gold! There are figurines that will make you laugh, statuettes that will make you wince, and other "frozen moments" that will recall your own moments of victory... and agony.

I hope you enjoy this store as much as I did putting it together. Whether you're a golfer looking for just the right "statement" to display your feelings about the game, or someone looking for "just the right gift" for a golfer, please...

If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to e-mail me directly by
using the contact form provided below.

Wishing you great golfing memories,

Ken

OK, that will do. I often go over and over my opening paragraph for months. I'm
never happy with it -- and you should never be happy with yours either. But this
will do to illustrate my point.

Those few lines of copy quickly tell visitors what's in it for them. The words
create a feel of passion for the game, and for the store. I am hoping that the
opening copy creates a **connection** between my visitor and me.

Notice that the sample opener does not say...

• We're the best, we have the most, etc.

• You'll be able to find whatever you're looking for.

• We're passionate about golf, we love it, etc.

You simply understand... and that's exactly what your prospective customer
wants you to do.

And that brings us to the next important point...

3.5. The 2-Level Description

Writing copy for a store is far less involved than creating a long sales letter for a
simple product line. You have more than one item to "show and tell" so you
can't write twenty screens for each item. But you do owe it to your customer,
and yourself, to point out all the benefits of each product, along with the
features.

The goal of the first level is to **get the click** on the product image (a thumbnail
image) so that you can start selling on the next level (enlarged image perhaps)
where you **"make the sale."**

Let's go back to the real world. This is the equivalent of your visitor walking
past a rack, seeing a jacket that she likes, briefly stopping to run the material
between thumb and fingers, and **then reaching out to...**

... check the price tag.

At this moment, in a real bricks-and-mortar store, a sales person would notice this, come over to the prospective customer and start selling. This type of personal attention usually translates into more sales.

Here's where **you** have the advantage. An online sales person **is** already there, in the form of your sales copy -- just at the moment when she wants to know more. Let's not waste the opportunity by telling her about features... she must experience the benefits of this product.

If the customer is interested, she'll read as much info as you offer, before she makes a decision. Great words pull out credit card outs.

From words to navigation -- it's all part of moving forward with our building blocks...

3.6. Design and Usability... Smooth And Seamless

Try to keep the same "Look and Feel" of your site on your store's home and product pages, right through to your order pages! That makes the transition from site to store seamless.

Your store also needs to be...

• as user-friendly as possible -- you want a visitor to be able to quickly see and check out an interesting item with a minimum of fuss

• easy to navigate

• inspire trust, confidence, and likeability

Visitors who come to your store from your site will have already been exposed to your high quality, informative content and will already know your "L&F" and navigation. Still, let's not take them for granted.

And for visitors who arrive directly to your store from a Search Engine or a pay-per-click advertising campaign -- completely bypassing your content site?

Trust, likeability and a good first impressions set the stage for a **lifetime customer.**

A confused or wondering visitor is not a good thing. Think about you own reactions. When you know exactly **what's what...** aren't you happier and more receptive to more information?

As you design your store design, implement as many of these important elements as you can...

• name, slogan/USP and opening paragraph should be the first things the eye sees. Enhance the perceived value of your products and store... it's quality all the way!

• a directory of goods and navigation in the left margin -- a must

• your opening paragraph or two, followed by...

• **"**hot products" or special features in the middle

• top and on the right side of the page...

   • optional, advanced features, searches

   • free e-zine subscription form, carried over from your content site

   • gift certificates

   • supplementary NavBar (top or bottom)

Build trust and confidence. Get **BBBOnline** to certify you. Enhance each item description with copy that makes a connection. You want to further increase your trust and likeability, subconsciously. So instead of listing a bunch of products with a product number and price and order button...

   • Give each thumbnail sketch an interesting name and a one-liner.

   • Make each thumbnail photo link to an "actual size" photo, with more copy that tells a short story about each. (For other types of stores, the thumbnail could link to a page that shows the product in bigger detail, or perhaps, three different people having a blast using it -- supported by fun, exciting copy.) These "large photo and copy" links should have an "Add to Shopping Cart" button, of course.

The key to success is the knowledge that people buy from stores they like and trust. It's that simple.

3.6.1. 3-Click Navigation

OK, let's say my wife is on the home page of a sports store looking for a gift for her brother who loves fishing. She spies the category "Specials" front and center on the page...

CLICK #1 takes her to an overview of what's on special and a short description of each item...

CLICK #2 on "Missing Fisherman T-shirt" takes her to an enlarged photo.

CLICK #3 on the "Order" button takes her to the order form and "Happy Birthday, Brother!"

There is a general principle of store navigation that you need to follow...

3 clicks or less must get your customer to the product. No more.

3.6.2. The Path to the Checkout

A sales pathway is the process by which you get your MWR. There isn't much of a sales pathway for an online store, however. It has more direct application when you are selling only one or two products, or a service.

An online store really only has the luxury of a home page opening paragraph (or two). Then one of your hot products or special offers should entice the visitor to the checkout counter. If not, your home page should at least get a click into left-hand NavBar's directory of products.

Unknown stores, whether they are big or small, need to work to increase their credibility. Three easy-to-implement actions can make a positive difference...

1) Present your **guarantee** upfront on your home page and make it as generous as possible.

2) Provide a link back to the home page's **"About us"** page on your site. (No need to recreate the wheel!)

3) Share your privacy/security policy.

Based on the above information (individual or combined), your visitors have a better sense of why they can trust your business (and you) to solve their concerns or fulfill their wishes.

In general, an online store does not need a Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) page, a closing page, or a "Last Ditch Pitch" (staples of a 1-product sales site).

Your shopping cart should do everything possible to close the sale. If your store sells **classic rock records...**

  ... like man, stay cool to the end. But get the sale.

Many people leave their carts abandoned... a **majority,** according to some studies. Make sure your prospective customer can quickly get to the checkout lane at each point.

Other ideas to help avoid the disappointment of abandoned shopping carts...

1) Be creative with shipping costs. Absorb shipping costs for orders over a certain dollar amount to encourage bigger orders. For the more price-sensitive customers, bury part of the shipping costs in the actual price of the product. You'll win over folks that you might have lost.

And it is usually a good idea to offer **two** shipping options... more expensive (fast) and cheaper (slow).

2) Reduce customers' worry about their credit cards. State that your orders are processed on a secure server, and all customer data is encrypted for protection. But don't make a huge deal about it, or you can increase anxiety.

3) Clearly explain your return policy. Include your policy with your guarantee. The more generous you are, the more comfortable your customers will be. And let me reassure you... after dealing with tens of thousands of customers, I can tell you that 99.9% of people are decent folks who won't abuse your generous policies.

3.6.3. Check the Checkout

Do not make your order page too complicated or offer too many options. This will only confuse your visitor.

Even when you're confident that things are as simple as they can be, always test usability by following this simple process...

Find someone, friend or relative to test -- someone who is similar to your target customer, if possible. Explain that he is not responsible for making a mistake. Any mistake using the store is **yours.**

Ask your volunteer to locate a widget, something you think that he would like to own. Can he find it? Then ask him to buy it. Is the transaction smooth? Ask him to verbalize everything he does.

It's always a good idea to test your order-taking system. Verify everything is OK. Is the wording clear? Is your credit card clearing integrated and functional?

All smooth? Great! You've just completed your own usability and pre-launch testing!

An ounce of prevention is worth ten pounds of cure. Stay ahead of the game. Be on top of your customer's shopping (and buying!) experience.

One final building block to add before we review our store-building checklist...

3.7. Tighten, Chop, Activate!

Make the copy on your store so tight that it squeaks... sharp, active copy that provides benefits and features. **In other words...**

... cut, chop, axe, & prune.

Spend a day or two away from your copy. Then re-visit all your words. I guarantee you'll find some copy that seemed brilliant at the time, but now leaves you wondering.
Are you finished cutting, chopping and pruning? Now polish until it simply can't shine any brighter.

OK, now it's time to get your red pen out and start checking off your store-building "to do" list before we go any further...

4. 10-Point Store Checklist

Check to make sure everything is geared towards getting your MWR (Most Wanted Response)...

✔ **1)** Is the store itself a great product? Sharp, creative grouping of products, originally presented?

✔ **2)** Is your opening paragraph effective? Does it fire that USP-gun? Does it ignite passion?

✔ **3)** Can your user reach every product (and even order!) in 3 clicks or better?

✔ **4)** Is there an effective use of photos, thumbnails leading to full-size? Do they show people using the product?

✔ **5)** Is the copy solid and customer-focused? Do you stress benefits?

✔ **6)** Does your visitor understand exactly what she gets?

✔ **7)** Have you eliminated your customer's risk (i.e., by posting a guarantee). Is that clear to your customer?

✔ **8)** Have you set at least two creative Backup Responses?

✔ **9)** Does it have a strong look and feel, seamless usability?

✔ **10)** Is there a smooth checkout (CLICK-CLICK-CLICK-kaCHING) process?

Everything set? You're well on your way to generating sales. You just need to make them happen...

5. Advanced Tips

Don't expect to sit back and wait for thousands of customers to merrily deliver your MWR. Work to make it happen. Your site has built and continues to grow a substantial, targeted, PREsold traffic base -- doing the **C** ➡ **T** ➡ **P**. Now it's your store's turn to monetize that traffic -- to do the **"M"** part. Use these cash-register-ringing techniques to close the deal...

5.1. Flag Your Newsletter

I cannot over emphasize the importance of a newsletter or e-zine for your store development. We already discussed its value as a Backup Response. If you are not already using MailOut tools to publish a newsletter from your site, I strongly recommend that you put it on your "to-do" list.

The benefits of a newsletter pertain to your store as well as to your site...

• Provides you with the ability to deliver your PREselling message and offerings right into the arms of a qualified audience

• Increases your Return on Investment (ROI), and visitor retention

• Builds trust, confidence, credibility and likeability.

In boiled-down terms, a newsletter vastly increases the odds that a visitor will become a paying customer.

Even though the majority of your store visitors have been exposed to your newsletter on your site, that doesn't mean that they have signed up already. It may be your unique product selection that tips the balance in favor of a subscription. So include a link to your opt-in e-zine subscription page on your store as well.

And, of course, you can't forget those people who come directly to your store from a Search Engine or an advertising campaign. This is their first exposure to your business and your newsletter.

You can never really be sure when your visitor will decide to subscribe. All you can be sure is that when she does, you want that subscription page nice and handy.

Use your SBI! opt-in e-zine to help you monetize your traffic on two fronts...

1) Introduce store visitors to the credentializing content on your site. This in turn increases the likelihood of a purchase or a return visit to your store.

2) Introduce your site visitors to your store and its unique offerings. They already like what you saying so they will be open to what you are selling!

It works both ways!

Bottom line?

Each subscription is a potential future sale and long term customer. So work to get your store visitors to sign-up. Start by adopting the following strategies...

• Feature your opt-in newsletter sign-up box prominently in the footer of your store so it appears on every page. This will add store-generated subscribers to your current newsletter. Upsell your newsletter as long as does not interfere with your selling efforts. For example...

```
"Sign up for our newsletter and earn a chance
to win 50% off your next purchase."
```

• Start an e-zine for customers. This allows you to follow up with these qualified contacts about store-specific offerings, news, updates, specials, etc.

OK. You now know how to get your store visitors subscribed to your newsletter. What about the newsletter itself? In addition to **providing great content,** aim to...

1) Highlight your most popular products, with a description just enticing enough to get your visitor to click-through to your store. Or present seasonal, holiday or special promotions that have special appeal to your clients.

Your goal is not to present your subscribers with an exclusive overview of your inventory -- just a few "carrots" to get them interested. When they are at your store, they can browse to their heart's content, right?

You may wish to pull out all the stops to get subscribers to your store with...

• specials and discounts

• overstocks and seconds

• one-of-a-kind offerings, and unique products

But don't forget about your partnership. Let your newsletter focus on encouraging visits to your site where you can introduce store products *within*

the context of your PREselling efforts! In other words, don't focus entirely on diverting visitors to your store, as a hard-sell may alienate some and compromise your integrity.

2) Keep your newsletter nice and tight, not big and elaborate. A couple of products is all you really need to feature.

Final piece of advice about your newsletter...

Combining content material and store products in your newsletter serves the best of both worlds. But don't let it waste your subscribers' time. Keep your focus on their needs. Integrate relevant product information **with care** so that the needs of both groups are met. The results are well worth it...

Subscribers who are familiar with your content-rich site are quietly and smoothly introduced to your store's offerings. Those who are familiar with your store will see your content-rich newsletter as a testimonial to your customer-first commitment. WIN-WIN!

Let's keep going with the other sales-generating techniques so that your store can keep on growing...

5.2. No Surprises!

Your customer...

... doesn't like surprises! You want her to feel confident throughout the entire buying process. Each surprise cuts her confidence, which in turn cuts your chances of making a sale.

Is your "BIG SPECIAL," that is advertised on your home page, back ordered? Your visitor is no longer surprised. She's mad. Say bye-bye to that sale... and to a return visit.

Be prepared. Be open...

• If an item is not stocked or ready for immediate shipment, let your customer know!

• Post return policies clearly.

• Post shipping policies, both for national and international orders.

• Offer a risk-reversal offer -- "If you're not happy for any, and I mean any reason, please return your item for a prompt refund."

• Post contact information in a prominent place.

There is a time and a place for surprises, but online shopping is not one of them.

5.3. Reassure Your Customer

The instant your visitor's eyeballs enter your store, he should immediately feel confident about you, your products, your shipping capabilities, your payment options -- in other words, they should feel reassured that your online store is legitimate, professional and well-managed.   This holds true whether they are coming from your site or directly from a search query.

Surprisingly, small things can make a big difference...

1) Customer testimonials

You don't often see testimonials in stores but that doesn't mean that they shouldn't be there. Customers will worry about a range of things...

• their personal information being respected

• their credit card information being secure

• fast and efficient fulfillment

• what to do if their choice is back-ordered, damaged in shipping, or if the wrong product is shipped

• inferior customer service.

How do you relieve the stress? Share what others say about you.

2) Offer some well-known brand name items that the customer is sure to be familiar with (if applicable to your theme)**.**

This is a credibility builder, in and of itself. With lesser-known items (unless they are very unique), it may be more challenging to convince your visitor that you have a viable business. (Of course, if your products are "one-of-a-kind," perceived value and quality must be high.)

3) Reply to all inquiries promptly and courteously.

Answer within a few hours, but absolutely within 24! This is a very simple way to rise above the competition, and build that bond of confidence with your future customer. (More on Customer Support a bit later on.)

Think like your customer. Think back to when **you** made your first online purchase -- what concerns did you have? What issues had to be addressed by the merchant before you clicked "Buy Now"?

Put a comforting cyber-hand around your customer's shoulder -- reassure her every step of the way, from the opening of your home page to Customer Support.

5.4. Help Your Customer Decide

The best bricks-and-mortar stores have terrific, in-store support. They can point you to similar items that cost less. They know which products have the features that you seek. They can quote great reviews.

Good news! You can use the Net to do the same as these strategies demonstrate...

• **Post product reviews from customers** -- This is actually way better than anything you could get in an offline store. With this strategy, "real" customers tell you what you need to know.

• **Offer alternative suggestions** -- Whenever you create your product descriptions, don't hesitate to make alternative recommendations. For example...

```
If you're purchasing this air purifier for a room larger than 300 square
feet, we recommend the more powerful SX 5200 model.  Click here to view
the SX 5200.
```

> **A good sales person will steer you in the direction of the right product for you.** Not long ago, I ventured over to the local mega-hardware-plex on a quest for a cordless drill. I asked the salesperson about a particular cordless model. He asked me what I was planning to fix. When I explained the job, he steered me to a more expensive, higher voltage model.
>
> Was this an upsell? Absolutely. Nothing wrong with that because it was genuine. Showing me the right tool for the job was helpful -- my original choice was under-powered.
>
> Can you do this online? Sure -- we just did in the air purifier example above! All you have to do is ask, "Are you sure this is the right [fill in the blank]?"   Then offer an alternate product. And, if appropriate, "downsell" a cheaper item -- you'll gain in confidence what you lose in dollars.
>
> A service like this provides real value to the customer -- and it's as close to the "real world" as you can get!

• **Reference your content articles whenever appropriate** -- For example... "Not sure why you would need an air purifier in your home? Click here for an informative article on household airborne pollutants, and the dangers they pose to the health of you and your family."   Visitors want to find the solution that fits their needs and you are helping them with their search. This concretely shows your visitors that you have their best interests at heart... that you are placing your own desire to make money second.

> It's a good idea to open these links in a new window. It keeps your customer in the store.

• **Offer helpful tips and solutions that show you are in tune with your customer** -- For those of us (ahem!) who don't have a clue about what to buy for Valentine's Day, I'd love to see a site that offers...

```
Survey Results are In!  Click here for...
Top Ten Valentine's Day Gifts for Women
```

Save the day by making great, topical suggestions!

• **Compare features and specs** -- A comparison chart of some kind is so much easier than visiting each product's page and making notes about individual features and specs. A visitor can see at a glance the differences between products. You are adding real value to the customer's buying experience. And that, in turn, builds good will and an open ear to your sales message.

OK, let's summarize...

• The customer sees which is the best product for him.

• The customer feels great about you, since you made it so easy.

Think you have a good shot at this sale? Without a doubt! You're 80% of the way to the sale! And that's the name of the game.

But don't stop at this point...

Always, always, always... improve your customer's experience and simultaneously move him closer to the sale.

5.5. Increase Perceived Value

Many, perhaps most, of your customers do not come to your store specifically to buy something. But that's your Most Wanted Response! So you need to catch wandering eyes, draw them into your store and turn those casual surfers into paying customers. How?

Increase the perceived value of your store in your visitor's mindset. Here are six potential ways to engage your visitor and get her caught up in the buying experience...

1) Provide special incentives for first time buyers. Absorb the shipping costs on the first purchase.

2) Trumpet your sale items on your opening page. A tried-and-true offline technique works online, too.

3) Offer time-limited sales. For example -- Today Only, Valentine's Day Heart-of-Hearts Sale, Easter Special, etc. Time limits convince visitors to buy now, rather than put it off until another time.

4) Offer a variety of shipping options. Never lose a sale due to a missing shipping option.

5) Exude warmth and friendliness. So many Web stores are brrrrr... cold. And distant. But not yours. Your store is one-to-one personal. In the real world, you'd talk with, not at, a visitor to your store. Do the same thing online.

6) Bundle products and accessories. This is an effective way to increase perceived value in the customer's mind. It also increases the sale amount. For example, offer a deal on toner or cartridges with the sale of a printer.

7) Place Web-optimized thumbnails of your most popular products on the home page. A customer on your home page is akin to an offline one who is standing on the sidewalk, peering in the front window. What gets him through the door? Simple -- an attractive product at a good price.

5.6. Change The "Front Window" Often

Okay, back to the local mall scene. Take a quick stroll around. See how the front window of each store displays products according to...

• the season

• new fashion trends

• special holidays or celebrations

• sales-oriented promotions

One window in particular pulls you over to the store. You peer inside. Still interested? You enter!

Do the same online!

A new home page keeps your store site **fresh and up-to-date.** There's nothing worse than still offering Mother's Day gifts by the time Father's Day rolls around. Shake up the products on the front page every week or two.

Do major renovations for special occasions -- holiday celebrations, changing seasons, that sort of thing. Hot, topical items have a good chance at an immediate sale, and special promotions pull your customer deeper into your store.

There is only more thing to cover before you roar to success -- the wrap-up to nail everything down...

6. Summing It All Up!

Building and running a successful store all boils down to three BIG concepts...

#1) Develop/source a great product line.

Your **store** is your product. Develop a unique product line that relates to the theme of your business, and present it in a stimulating and professional manner. This is your foundation for success.

#2) Build a store that SELLS that great product.

The "look and feel," descriptions, photos, usability, strong copy, simple and intuitive ordering options, etc. -- get all these building blocks right, and you're 80% of the way there!

#3) Attract and drive targeted customers to your store.

If you don't have traffic, **you're like the proverbial tree far away in the forest...**

... if it falls, does it make a noise?

 Who knows? Who cares? No one. So...

Continue to prioritize the development of high quality content for your site. Content attracts highly qualified visitors, who are inherently interested in products directly related to the theme/topic of those articles. Relevant, high-value content builds trust and credibility, so that when you do refer a visitor to your store, those visitors are much more likely to buy.

You must have the **C** ➡ **T** ➡ **P** process in gear and producing results before you attempt to **Monetize** your traffic. Otherwise, there will be nobody to monetize.

To sum it all up, even more succinctly...

Use your site to build plenty of high-value content that drives traffic and PREsells visitors to your unique store offerings. Present your products professionally, with seamless and smooth usability. Write tight descriptions that sell.

And finally...

Treat your customer like gold. A customer-first focus is critical.

When you get the basics right, everything else falls into place.

Or I should say... falls into **profitable** place! Happy selling!