

VITAL: THE user EXPERIENCE



Jennifer Rae Stine,
President, Fortune
Web Marketing

Broadly speaking, I think independent dealers have coped with what have been an incredible 15 months or so really well – certainly better than many anticipated. They encountered many challenges along the way, of course.

From a technology standpoint, I would highlight three. The first is to provide the kind of experience customers expect. Many dealers still have a B2B mentality when it comes to online ordering. True, things like purchasing approvals and contract pricing will never go away in this channel, but independents need to think about the user experience from a consumer perspective. It needs to be easy, seamless and merchandised for every customer.

The second is creating an open web store that allows guest orders and pricing. How is your software provider handling this? The particular difficulty is to set up your guest user contract pricing competitively, while at the same time not jeopardising current contract customers.

The third challenge is featuring products on your website catalogue which are not from the wholesalers and adding new catalogues from various manufacturers. Dealers have become very creative in terms of sourcing safe workplace items during the pandemic, but there are still many issues with obtaining good product content, and quickly and efficiently adding items to their online product portfolio.

MARKETING PIVOTS

As much as we can, we try to help in our areas of expertise. We focus on marketing strategies – constantly, often multiple times a day for every dealer. From products to delivery, pricing and more, everything we create is based on what dealers have access to, what stage in closing or opening their region is (or was) in and shifting their contracted strategies to new ones.

For example, we temporarily shifted clients that had been engaging in successful SEO strategies before the pandemic to social media and email marketing campaigns so we could follow their customers and where they were engaging online.

Some dealers did not have a strong organic search presence or website, and they struggled to catch up. For these, we shifted from, say, social media and basic website maintenance to more intense, evergreen marketing strategies.

There is still plenty to be done. We need better personalised merchandising options to enhance the onsite buying experience. While product content has improved greatly, many manufacturers need to step up their content game and software providers need to adapt their design to better handle it.

THE 'NEW' BUYER

One of my perennial bugbears is a resistance to the fact that buyer personas have changed, in our industry as much as anywhere else. 'Old buyers' were price driven and bought product one cent cheaper from one company compared to another; they wasted time ordering from multiple vendors and spent even more hours researching them – no matter how much dealers tried to drill home soft costs and the benefits of a single-source supplier.

Buyers today want great access and ease of use; they want to be educated along the way and have options at their fingertips. Importantly also, they want to establish trust with their supplier. They seek authority and expertise from their business products partner, and prefer one order, not many from multiple suppliers. And they are certainly less price orientated.

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GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

Some of the biggest areas of growth right now – and certainly something we at Fortune Web Marketing are working on – are:

- Social media marketing: if your business is not utilising social to increase brand awareness and your digital footprint, you are missing out on a tremendous opportunity. Whether you like it or not (or indeed believe it), the social channels are where your customers are, personally and professionally.
- Merchandising and improving the user experience on e-commerce platforms: it's important that the software providers can facilitate this.
- True inbound strategies: creating content that appeals to buyers during the various stages of their journeys; and capitalising on the EAT principle, ie expertise, authority and trust.
- SEO: this should be at the very heart of any strong digital marketing strategy. Without SEO, the chances of growing your commercial business online are slim for a dealer. It's comparable to building a house upon a foundation with cracks.
- Video production and marketing.

NEXT ISSUE

Special 30th anniversary issue

- Big Interview: Mike Gentile, Independent Suppliers Group
- The rise and fall of the global big boxes
- Defining moments & biggest influences
- State of the industry around the globe
- The next generation

