

52 TIPS TO ENHANCE YOUR ONLINE BUSINESS



OSCAR FEITO

 shopall

Cover art by <http://www.webdesignhot.com>.



<http://www.oscarfeito.com>

Dear reader,

If you are reading this publication, you're probably involved in online business in one way or another, or perhaps you are thinking about launching your own Internet business. In either case, you probably have very little spare time and you've probably come across hundreds of similar publications claiming to reveal the elusive secrets of online business success. I will not waste your time.

There is, I'm sorry to say, no fool-proof recipe for creating a successful online business. There are an infinite number of roads that can lead to the desired outcome, whatever that might be, and in many cases you will need to find which ones work for you by trial and error (and common sense). There are, however, certain tips and suggestions that tend to be more effective than others. This is what we will focus on here.

I have tried to make these tips as general as possible so that they can be universally applied to virtually any kind of online venture, although some are especially relevant for e-commerce sites. But, since commerce generally refers to the sale of goods and services with the ultimate goal of making a profit, virtually any sound business – whether it sells books, streams movies, or allows users to interact with one another and monetizes through advertising – should fit this description.

Why 52 tips? Well, 25 seemed too few and 100 seemed overkill. 52 is a handy number, being the number of weeks in a year. If you suffer from a certain degree of attention deficit disorder like me, you will also find that 52 tips are about as many as you can read in one stretch without losing your concentration.

After a year's time, when reflecting upon what you did over the past 365 days to improve your business, wouldn't it be nice to be able to list 52 specific measures that you took: one for every week of the year? Of course, reality has a nasty habit of rendering our plans obsolete, and many of the tips presented here cannot be successfully implemented in 1 week but rather require on-going work.

But of course, dear reader, you already know that. So let's stop wasting valuable time and let's get on with it, shall we?

Madrid, August 2011



About the Author

I am an economist by training, and an online business-developer by experience. In 2001 I co-founded [my first Internet startup](#), which was successfully sold to [Antevenio](#) in 2009.

Before co-founding Shopall I contributed to the creation of the E-commerce team at [Terra Networks](#), as well as working for Deutsche Bank's investment banking division in London.

I am truly passionate about emerging technology, innovation and online marketing trends and blog at <http://www.oscarfeito.com> (sorry, most of my writing is in Spanish).



PS. I am not a guru, and neither hope nor expect to become one anytime soon.

About Shopall

Shopall was created in 2001 and is currently a leading provider of product search engine technology, contextual product advertising and white-label comparison shopping services throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

Over the past decade Shopall has launched a number of highly successful products including one of the first price comparison services based on mobile barcode scanning, an advertising platform allowing users to interact with print ads through SMS and a contextual advertising platform that currently generates over 1 billion monthly impressions worldwide.

In 2009 Shopall was acquired by Antevenio, a global company that has been operating in the digital marketing sector for over 14 years. Currently, the company offers a wide range of services including display advertising on an exclusive premium ad network, performance and affiliate marketing, mobile marketing, and e-commerce. Antevenio is listed on the Alternext NYSE Exchange of Paris and has offices in Madrid, Barcelona, Milan, London, Mexico DF, Buenos Aires, and Paris.



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Tip #1 – Enhance value

Online business in general (in fact, any kind of business for that matter) is all about adding value. Why would a customer buy a product from your online store if they can purchase that same product (maybe even cheaper) by driving a few miles? The answer is that they probably wouldn't. This seems rather self-evident, but I have encountered dozens of businesses that focus on what **they** feel like selling online rather than offering what the customer really wants. Before proceeding with the rest of this document, and before modifying any component of your online business, this 'unique value proposition' must be crystal clear in your head, and it should govern every move that you make online. Ask yourself regularly, "What problem is my business trying to solve?"

Tip#2 – Prominently display your key value propositions

When you visit the online retailer <http://www.zappos.com>, two messages immediately jump out at you. They are very hard to miss. First, that the company provides free shipping both ways. Second, that they have a free 365 day return policy. These are fundamental value propositions for the customer, and as such they are prominently displayed throughout the site. In the home page alone, these two value propositions are displayed not once but twice, both above the fold. Do you have anything especially interesting that consumers would like to know? (Remember that you should, after all that is the essence of your business). Make sure that your value proposition is accurately and effectively communicated throughout your site.

Tip#3 – Talk to your customers

In the age of e-mail, Twitter, Google Plus and Facebook, the good old phone call is still an extremely powerful tool. Make time to call a few of your customers on a regular basis, preferably towards the end of the week when they are most likely to be upbeat and willing to speak to you. In the case of e-tailers, an adequate starting place could be customers that placed an order within the past 24 hours. Call a few of them up and ask how they found the experience. Was it easy for them? Did they have any trouble finding what they were looking for or checking-out? Is there anything that you can do to improve their experience? Take notes, and do not stash them in the bottom of a drawer.

Act upon this insight. Ending the call with a discount code in appreciation for the customer's time is a nice touch.



Tip#4 – Users will be shoppers (eventually)

One of the most frequently asked questions by online business owners is, “How can I attract customers to my website?” This is a valid inquiry, but it should be complemented by, “How can I attract users to my website, even if they are not planning to buy at that particular moment”.

Quality content is not only critical to achieve strong search engine rankings, but it is also pivotal in attracting users to your website even if they are not yet contemplating a purchase. Three excellent examples of companies that place a strong emphasis on providing value added content are Amazon.com, Threadless.com and Barrabes.com in Spain.

Millions of users visit Amazon.com to read book reviews or browse lists created by other users, even if they are not specifically looking to buy anything at that particular moment. Users flock to Threadless.com in droves seeking inspiring t-shirt designs, arguably an art form in itself, even if they are not specifically looking to purchase a t-shirt at that particular moment. Barrabes.com is a point of reference for mountaineers, climbers, skiers and trekkers searching not only for products, but also for quality content relating to their hobby.

Notice that the key phrase in each of these cases is that visitors might not be looking to shop “*at that particular moment*”. However, once your website becomes a preferred destination for a given subject or user base, sales are likely to ensue. This exercise in community building on the back of quality content makes your business a live, breathing, creature. Pay attention and nurture your content, and in doing so you will be protecting your most important asset; your user community.

Tip#5 – Be on top of the news

You would be surprised by the number of business owners that only read news about their specific market or industry segment. If you run an online store, it seems logical enough that you subscribe to a plethora of news feeds about e-commerce. This, however, is not sufficient. The Internet, in case you haven't realized, is changing. And it is doing so at an increasingly faster pace.

Many of the latest trends and innovations in the digital space – devices such as tablets, services such as Quora or 4Square... - were not initially directly tied to e-commerce and only found their way there after some time. Similarly, the social media hype did not feature prominently in e-commerce news sources in the early days. If you want to innovate, you need to step out of your comfort zone and stay



ahead of the curve. What are the next innovations, and how do you think that you can apply them to your market? The caveat is that too much information can actually be detrimental to your business; be informed but filter your sources to avoid the pitfall of information overload.

Tip#6 – The broader market

When you are designing a consumer-oriented website, whether it is an e-commerce site or any other online service, it is very easy to contaminate your user interface by employing subjective criteria that might not be correct. It is really easy to end up designing for ourselves, in terms of what we consider an effective user interface to be, largely ignoring the perceptions of our target audience. The solution is actually quite simple: if you are designing a website for the general public, find the lowest common denominator and ask those people to test the interface in front of you.

To put it differently, if you are building an online business that sells shoes, with the idea that even your mother could use it, get your mother in front of the computer and ask her to search for a product and complete a purchase. I guarantee that you will discover things that you hadn't even considered possible.

Tip #7 – Welcome to You: establishing an Identity

If I say "cereal", "car" or "beer", it is very likely that many readers will come up with a mental image of a relatively small group of brands that we immediately and unconsciously associate with the aforementioned concepts. There is a lot of competition in the online business space, and it is becoming increasingly challenging to come up with feasible products and services that have not been tried out before. Many times your role will be to provide a product or a service better than everyone else, forging an Identity in the process so that your brand comes to mind when users think about a particular concept.

Tip #8 – Complete the feedback loop

When trying to build an innovative product or service in a rapidly evolving landscape, feedback is critical. Employees, current and potential customers, friends and family can all bring a fresh perspective to the table. It is your responsibility to listen to everyone in order to determine how your product or service may be improved. However, at the end of the day, the decision is yours and yours alone – broaden feedback, act upon it, but do not delegate decision-making.



Tip#9 – Drop the fancy language

The Internet is all about “global”. At its core, perhaps the main advantage of conducting any type of online business is the potential to reach millions of customers around the world. Out of a global population approaching 7 billion people, it is estimated that more than 2 billion are Internet users. One of your main objectives should be to think about each and every one of these users as potential customers, and try to reach as many of them as possible. Sure there are practical limitations – language barriers, logistics and so on – but in principle you should try to broaden your scope to reap the most out of a digital business in a global, connected marketplace. Estimates vary, but it is generally believed that close to 500 million people in the world understand English (which, by the way, is about half the number of those that speak Chinese). For practical purposes English is a good bet, but bear in mind that this will not necessarily be the mother tongue of many of your users. Be careful with your expressions, product descriptions, help and calls to action. Try to make them as universally understandable as possible, without being plain dull.

Tip#10 – Really, About Us

If a user takes the time to visit your “About Us” section – and by all means your website should have one – it is because they want to know you better. Chances are that you’re not paying much attention to this page, in which case your customers are probably not obtaining the information they require. According to renowned usability expert [Jakob Nielsen](#), an effective “About Us” section should include the following key elements: (1) a tagline (2) a summary (3) a fact sheet elaborating on essential facts about your business (4) detailed information with greater depth. Do not underestimate the importance of this section. If you want to explore “About Us” best practices in greater detail, I recommend reading [this study](#).

Tip#11 – Move beyond overall conversion rate

By this stage, most online entrepreneurs realize the value of ROI (return on investment) and the importance of accurate metrics to optimize key areas of their business. However, measuring the overall conversion rate alone, (simply stated, shoppers as a percentage of total website visitors), is really not that insightful. In order to understand exactly what sections of your website you should be working harder on, you need to exhaustively track user behaviour throughout your site. For example, do 50% of your visitors end up visiting the Help Section? You might not be communicating something well enough. What proportion of your users visit the Contact Us section but fail to actually send you a message? Note that



gathering this data is just half the battle. Acting upon this information –changing elements of your website to improve these ratios and re-measuring to determine whether the changes were effective or not – is equally essential.

Tip#12 – Peer metrics and benchmarking

When setting performance goals for your website, it is tempting to benchmark your performance against similar companies in your sector or against average metrics published in industry reports. The problem of this approach is twofold: first, measurement techniques can vary substantially. Second, it is often very difficult to find truly comparable companies. Therefore, just because company X is reporting a 1% “conversion rate”, or industry report Y is reporting a “\$100 average order size” for companies in your field, does not necessarily imply that you should aim for these values.

In fact, although they might be interesting as a broad reference, it is highly likely that your business has one or several elements that make it unique. Focus instead on deciding what your own key performance indicators are and establishing a consistent methodology for measuring these performance indicators, and then strive to continuously improve your metrics over time.

Tip#13 – Don’t fool yourself (or others) by vanity metrics

As mentioned in the previous tip, companies should focus on improving their own metrics rather than constantly benchmarking against industry averages. I came across this [post in Tech Crunch](#) which takes the argument a bit further. The crux of the article is that certain metrics (one million downloads, 10 million registered users, 200 million tweets per day...) might well be signs of traction, but just as often they are not.

It is important to distinguish between real metrics and what Lean Startup guru Eric Ries calls “vanity metrics”. Vanity metrics, the Tech Crunch article continues, are things like registered users, downloads, and raw pageviews. They are easily manipulated, and do not necessarily correlate to the numbers that really matter: active users, engagement, cost of acquiring new customers, and ultimately revenues and profits.

Focus on more actionable metrics and trends.



Tip #14 – Exceed customer expectations

Zappos has its “Wow Factor”, Disney Parks and Resorts has its “Disney Touch”, both companies have something in common: they thrive to exceed customer expectations time and time again. It’s in their DNA, from the President of the company down to the janitor that sweeps the sidewalks on Main Street USA in Walt Disney World. In a world where competition is fierce, and companies cannot afford to depend on one line of business alone, you are in effect competing with everyone else. When an employee (*cast member*) at a Disney theme park goes over and above what is expected of them so that you can have a magical day, you will soon start expecting that superior customer experience everywhere: not only at theme parks, but with every single business you interact with. When what you do is secondary, and your line of business is anecdotal, you become what Zappos calls *powered by service*. Focus on customer service, encourage your team to be creative when looking for ways to impress customers, and they will come back.

If you wish to learn more about exceeding customer expectations, (and, after all, who does not like to learn a thing or two), I strongly recommend reading [“Delivering Happiness: A Path to Profits, Passion, and Purpose”](#) by Tony Hsieh and [“Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service”](#) by Theodore B. Kinni.

Tip #15 – Balance back-end and consumer experience

If a user wastes too much time to perform a specific action on your site, such as registering or checking-out, they will leave and probably won’t return. However, if your site appears worthless and unattractive, you really won’t have to worry about user abandonment because in fact you won’t have users.

Online business tends to involve a delicate balancing act between consumer experience on the one hand, and back-end infrastructure on the other. Both are equally important, one is basically worthless without another, and to build a solid business you will need to balance your resources equally among these areas. Remember, you are selling an experience and not just a product or service.

Tip #16 – Plant visual memories

Visual memory, also known as “the mind’s eye”, describes the relationship between perceptual processing and the encoding, storage and retrieval of the resulting neural representations. It is a relevant concept in a number of different fields, from psychology to education and advertising, which essentially delves into how something we experience (such as your website) will be remembered and recalled in the future. As an online business manager, when designing your



website, it is important to focus on leaving a visual footprint in the user's mind which is likely to lead to a whole range of positive effects including repeated purchases or positive word of mouth. Colour schemes, logos, relying on visual representation versus text wherever possible and page layout are just a few of the factors that can stimulate our customers' visual memory.

If you would like to know more about the psychological foundations of marketing, which is actually a fascinating topic, I recommend checking out "[Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion](#)" by Robert B. Cialdini, arguably the best book on what is becoming known as the science of persuasion.

Tip#17 – Design for ease, not for coolness

When it comes to designing a website where users are ultimately expected to register or purchase a product or service, I strongly recommend that you use technology and programming skills as a means to that end and not as an end in itself. Great user experiences are simple, and simple is defined by users being able to understand and use your service with little difficulty. Stay out of people's way, and don't set obstacles or interrupt the user experience with bells and whistles that do not have a clear purpose. Don't be creative for creativity's sake, make sure that every element on your website moves you closer to your goals... because you do have a goal, right?

Tip#18 – Beware of logical fallacies

A logical fallacy refers to an inconsistent reasoning when trying to make a point or uphold an argument. An argument that is based upon a logical fallacy cannot be valid (although the conclusion might be), and one must be extremely careful to avoid these pitfalls when analyzing the performance of our website or extracting conclusions from our data.

When negotiating with third parties (advertisers, publishers, suppliers...) be aware of these common fallacies: "ad hominem" (an argument that attempts to counter another's claims or conclusions by attacking the person, rather than addressing the argument itself), "ad ignorantiam" (asserting that a proposition must be true because it has not been proven false or vice versa) and "argumentum ad verecundiam" (asserting that a proposition must be true if it is also upheld by someone with a given authority) are just some examples of fallacious arguments that we are likely to encounter in our online business. For an extensive list of logical fallacies and examples, have a look at the book "[Nonsense: Red Herrings, Straw Men and Sacred Cows: How We Abuse Logic in Our Everyday Language](#)" by Robert J. Gulaby. Stay alert!



Tip#19 – Users are (typically) not mentalists

I'm not sure if I'm just paying more attention lately, but it seems that too often I get some type of error message after filling in and submitting an online registration form.

The registration forms are simple enough: Username, e-mail address, password and password verification fields. However, *after* submitting the required information, I am told that the password is invalid as it must contain at least X characters, and/or a combination of uppercase and lowercase characters and/or a combination of letters and numbers. I kid you not, this has happened to me at least twice already this week and it seems to be an increasingly popular trend. Please, don't do this to your users. I seriously doubt that you should be telling your users how to create their passwords. In the best of cases, it will make it more difficult for them to remember and in the worst of cases they will simply ignore you and go elsewhere. However, if you do feel that it is your mission to dictate how we must construct our passwords, please let us know beforehand and not after filling in the form. We are not mentalists, thank you.

Tip #20 - Twitter and Google Plus as communication channels

Twitter - the microblogging platform launched in 2006 - saw phenomenal growth during 2010. In fact, the company claims that over 100 million new accounts were opened during last year alone. Similar Google Plus, launched just a couple of weeks ago and at the time of writing still in private beta, purportedly has over 15 million users.

While it remains to be seen how many of those Twitter and Google Plus accounts are actually active, and remain active over time, what is clear is that as of today these tools are just too popular to ignore as communication channels. Allow users to interact with you through Twitter and Google Plus as an alternative (not a substitute) to email, telephone or other more traditional channels.

Tip#21 – Balance conversion optimization and traffic acquisition budgets

It is not rare for online businesses to invest heavily in traffic acquisition (search engine marketing, display advertising, shopping engine feed submissions...), often dedicating a significant portion of their budget to obtain assistance from qualified professionals. However, conversion rate optimization rarely attracts this kind of attention and is typically worked out within the organization.



It is not a matter of choosing one over the other, but sometimes bottom line profits can increase more by investing in maximizing sales from existing traffic than by throwing more money to attract new users. Are you balancing your conversion optimization and traffic acquisition budgets?

Tip#22 – The SEO paradox

Just a couple of days ago, I sat down with the CEO of a consolidated online retailer that's already generating \$10 million in yearly sales. SEO has been their absolute priority over the past 3 or 4 years, and they have funnelled a significant amount of resources into consultancy services and implementation of ambitious SEO strategies.

As might be expected, as a result of these efforts a substantial majority of their traffic now originates from search engines and it has become an essential part of their business. How could it not be? This is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Gear your company towards SEO, and you will become increasingly dependant on search engine traffic. It will be increasingly difficult to see the forest, because the SEO tree will be blocking your way. Of course, SEO is important, that's beyond the point. The point is, if you were to distribute your resources evenly among three or four platforms for the generation of quality leads which one would be more effective? It does not make sense to dedicate 60 or 70% of your engineering resources to SEO, and then expect Facebook or Twitter to be a key component in qualified leads.

By the way, should the major search engines decide to alter their indexation or ranking algorithms, the effects on this particular company could be catastrophic as they would lose around 75% of their incoming traffic. Now that's a scary thought that might send chills down the spine of a couple of readers.

Tip#23 – Locate defection leak holes

Depending on which research report you read, anywhere between 60-90% of customers fail to complete the purchase process after selecting a product. In other words, the average online retailer could multiply sales by identifying what part in the process these leaks occur, why they are occurring and what can be done to avoid them. This is not a simple process, as it requires strong analytical and decision-making skills, but it is an altogether impossible task if you do not have the data. So, the first step is installing a tracking system that will pinpoint exactly where your visitors bailed out during the purchasing process.



Note that defections are not only relevant in the context of transactional e-commerce sites, but also for consumer-oriented service websites where users fail to complete registration.

Tip#24 – Required registration = frustration

Few things are more frustrating in digital life than spending 20 minutes on an online retailer's site, selecting a few products and proceeding to check-out only to be informed that it is necessary to create an account before completing your purchase.

Although the theory of this structure is clear enough (after navigating the aforementioned process, the marginal effort to complete the registration process before proceeding to check-out is relatively small), reality begs to differ. If your ultimate goal is to sell products and services through your website, which is really what it should be, and an unregistered user has already completed 90% of the process, don't erect more barriers. There's nothing wrong with inviting the user to create an account after completing the purchase, explaining the benefits of registration for future purchases, but don't force them to make that decision before check-out.

Tip#25 – Login information

The average Internet user has registered on more websites than he or she may remember, and it would be foolish for us to expect them to remember their login and password information for this myriad of services. Although users might remember access information for the handful of sites that they visit on a regular basis, e-commerce websites are often seasonal visits so we should do everything in our power to help users remember their login information.

If a user has made a purchase on our website in the past, probably one of the first things they will do will be to search their e-mail hoping to find that elusive login information. Many retailers do provide username information in their welcome e-mails, but due to security concerns it is infrequent to provide both username and password information in this e-mail.

Security is certainly a valid concern, but the fact that a one-time user does not complete a subsequent purchase because they can't be bothered to click on that dull ***Forgot my Password*** link (which tends to be rather condescending anyway) should also be a powerful concern for online store managers.



Tip#26 – User communication preferences

Where possible, ask users to indicate their contact preferences. This can be especially useful for you online retailers out there, where your ability to successfully contact a customer can significantly enhance their experience. For example, if users specify both an e-mail address and a telephone number upon registration, ask them to specify how they would like to be contacted under different circumstances; promotions and special deals might be communicated by e-mail, but communications related to a recent order (for example surprise upgrades or shipping issues) might be best communicated by phone.

Tip#27 – How many e-mails are too many e-mails?

Although social networks are quickly gaining ground as a source of information for online consumers, regular e-mail newsletters should still be an essential component of your online marketing mix. If a consumer is in the market for a new laptop, it seems rather plausible that they will be interested in receiving relevant information (in particular, special deals), but where do you draw the line?

Give users the opportunity of selecting how many newsletters they would like to receive from you (daily, weekly, monthly...) and link prominently to these settings from every newsletter you send. E-mail marketing is an extremely powerful tool, but it is a double-edged sword that can also wreak havoc on your brand.

Tip#28 – Show users a preview of what they're subscribing for

If presented with the choice of "*subscribe to our weekly newsletter*" or "*subscribe to our weekly newsletter that will showcase new products and exclusive offers on selected merchandise that might be of interest to you, and by the way here's an example of what it actually looks like*" I would go with the latter.

It is a recurring theme for website managers to assume that when they talk about something, a newsletter in this case, their users will interpret it exactly the same as they do. This is really not the case; if a user has a pre-conceived (and not very positive) perception of what a newsletter is, probably influenced by the dozens of newsletters he already receives on a daily basis, chances are they won't be interested in receiving another one although your might actually add value. Spell this out for your users, and be as graphical as possible. Remember that a picture is worth a thousand words.



Tip#29 – Do you sell gift cards?

Experts estimate that the gift card market is worth around \$60 billion, and many believe that it is going to be a prominent feature of the e-commerce business in the near future. Regardless of whether you are selling physical goods or virtual services, gift cards can really make life easy for gift hunters.

If your loyal customers appreciate your business, give them the chance to spread the word by purchasing gift cards for their friends and family. It is an effective way of attracting new customers who otherwise might not have interacted with you. Plus, they make the perfect gift for your most special customers.

Tip#30 – Your own deal of the day

A [recent study](#) reveals that there are currently over 320 “deal of the day” sites in the US alone, and that they are expected to bring in a staggering \$2,6 billion during 2011, up from \$1,1 billion last year.

If you are selling products online, you have your logistics in place and you have an audience, why not get in there and tap that market? Reward existing customers with membership to your exclusive “deal of the day” section, or alternatively offer all your visitors the chance to join. Beyond being appealing to customers, these daily deals can actually be addictive and since they are inherently social in nature, users will tend to share them with their social graph if they are any good. It's definitely worth trying.

Tip#31 – The wish list (non)monopoly

When talking about wish lists, inevitably Amazon.com springs to mind as if both products were irremediably affixed. Here's the breaking news: Amazon does not have a monopoly on wish lists, and if you run an online business you should really consider offering this service to your customers.

Wish Lists are great for users to keep track of what they want, even if for any reason they don't intend to purchase it right now. By allowing users to share their wish lists with friends and family come birthday or Christmas time, users can increase their chances of getting something that they really want. Because the customer's address is already included in their account, and therefore linked to that wish list, loved ones purchasing products from that wish list should only need to select the product they wish to buy and enter their payment information. As a collateral effect, you might get them hooked on to your products and top-notch customer service too!



Tip#32 – Run your own affiliate program

If your website sells products or services targeted to a very specific audience, it really might be worth your while to manage your own affiliate program with a select group of niche publishers. There is nobody better than you to know what websites your target audience typically visits, and reaching out to these webmasters has several advantages.

First, it is generally beneficial to establish a good working relationship with these sites. If your products really are a good match for their users, it will be in their interest to come up with creative ways to present them to their audience. Your passion and knowledge of your products will far outweigh that of a conventional affiliate marketing company, so both you and the publisher can really work together to promote sales. Furthermore, affiliate networks are generally great tools to reach a broader audience but they need to find an adequate mix of volume and conversion to make your program worth their while.

So, by focusing on the 8 or 10 publishers that generate an overwhelming proportion of your leads, your affiliate marketing investment might well be optimized.

Tip #33 – Gamify your world

Gamification refers to applying game play mechanics to non-game applications such as shopping. Because games are typically fun and addictive, making us simple humans irrevocably predisposed to play, this increasingly popular technique can greatly encourage website interaction and user engagement.

Loyalty programs or supermarket scratch cards are better known examples of gamification techniques, but a great deal of innovation is occurring in this space and the chances are that you might find a clever way of playing games with your customers. For further information I highly recommend watching [this talk](#) by former Disney Imagineer and game designer Jesse Schell which has become a commonly referenced vision of the possibilities of the future of gamification.

Tip#34 – Showcase your products in context

When purchasing certain kinds of products online, users will typically have doubts. Doubts about how the product will fit them, doubts about how the product may be combined with other stuff they have, doubts about whether it will be suited for the space they intended...



While you will never be able to dissipate all of a client's potential queries beforehand, there are certain things you can do. Wherever possible, try to show your product "in operation". If it's a piece of clothing, don't just show it on a shelf. Show someone wearing it. Selling laptop cases? Show how much other stuff you'll be able to cram into the bag. If you're selling speakers, dimensions are critical so make sure to show them in a furnished room for scale. We've seen that images are crucial to the online selling experience; if you can make these images especially relevant, all the better.

Tip#35 – Unique product descriptions

If you are an online retailer, more likely than not you are using standard texts provided by suppliers or manufacturers to describe your products. This is really not the optimal way to go, for several reasons.

First, there are probably hundreds of other websites out there – including the manufacturer – using the same texts. This duplication of content is unlikely to help your search engine rankings. Second, from the user perspective, it is really best to craft unique product descriptions tailored to your user base. Standard manufacturer product specs are probably useful, and surely a number of your customers will want to read them, but it is also likely that these standard texts will be rather meaningless to many other users.

Try to find different ways to describe your products, using different keywords and answering questions rather than creating new ones. In other words, it is fine to mention that a given laptop runs on a 2.66hz processor, with 4 threads, and a 3MB cache, but it would be way cooler to explain why this is worth an extra \$200.

Tip#36 – OMG, online images are free!

OK, they're really not completely free, but the benefits of enhancing online product descriptions with quality pictures far outweigh the production and storage costs. Unlike in a traditional print publication or mail order catalogue, where extra images tend to mean extra pages and hence extra dollars, adding images online so that users can get a better idea of what they are buying is really a winning proposition. Make the pictures on your website big and colourful, make them plentiful, and grant users the power to see every detail of the product from close up.



A picture is worth at least a thousand words, and it certainly beats trying to explain your users in words what 20 micron finely crimped Peppin Merino wool looks like.

Tip#37 – Cross-selling with a mission

Cross-selling is a technique designed by marketers to increase sales by suggesting products that the consumer might be interested in, typically because they are complementary or closely related to what they are viewing. Most online businesses understand this, and use cross-selling tactics throughout their website, but in many cases the message is often inconsistent which can in fact lead to fewer sales.

Effective cross-selling requires a clear set of criteria and a consistent implementation: what are we basing our recommendations on? Are we suggesting products based on past customer behaviour, or are we using intelligent recommendation algorithms that may suggest product pairings even if they haven't actually been sold together? Do we always want to suggest a product that is priced lower than the product selected by the user? Are we creating a false sense of urgency? Is our recommendation to the user creating greater indecisiveness and hurting sales?

All of these are questions that must be asked, and answered, before implementing an effective cross-selling program.

Tip#38 – Hard currency versus % discounts in your copy

The human psyche is a fascinating thing, and I would highly recommend anyone running an Internet business or in any way involved in online marketing to study its implications on the decision-making process.

Apparently minor subtleties such as displaying a promotion in terms of hard currency ("x dollars off") or percentage discount ("y% off") can make a huge difference in overall conversion rates. Research has demonstrated that our cognitive judgements are influenced by the way decision problems are framed, and consequently the decision of whether or not to purchase a discounted product will be affected by how we present the discount to the user. Although the consensus seems to be in favour of presenting discounts on high-priced items in terms of hard currency and low-price items in terms of relative percentage discounts, the only conclusive way to find out what works for you is split testing; try out both formulae across a different range of products and determine what is most effective for your online business.



Tip#39 – Display delivery cut off dates for special holidays

“Buy your Christmas presents online, in the comfort of your own home”. “Get that very special someone a very special gift for Valentine’s Day, without ever leaving the office”.

Appealing as these claims may be, they are also a ticking time-bomb for the reputation of your online business if not managed correctly. If you are using these claims on your website or advertising materials to generate incremental sales during special holidays, make sure that you clearly specify delivery cut off dates and that you stick to them. In other words, what is the latest a user can order if they want to be 100% certain that their order is delivered by the 24th of December or by the 14th of February? Bear in mind that this is not a simple task, as a significant part of this responsibility lies with your logistics company, but if you screw up customers will blame you. Better be conservative...

Tip#40 – Add to cart button

The “Add to Cart” button is without a doubt the most important call to action prompt on an e-commerce website (in fact, most online websites rely on calls to action).

At the end of the day, everything else you do should be geared towards improving overall conversion ratios and this button is a critical aspect of performance. There are essentially two different types of people that create these buttons: the programmer (who if left alone will typically implement something functional and simple) and the web designer (who if left alone will tend to favour a more flashy design that stands out from other “add to cart” buttons found online). What you really need is something in between.

First, the button should clearly be designed to look like a button; the ultimate goal is usability, and therefore users must clearly understand the purpose of that button. Prettier buttons do not necessarily generate more conversions and they might actually decrease it. Second, make sure that the button is really easy to find. You might want to start placing it as close as possible to the price, so that users don’t have to look all over the page to find it, but also try a different position such as the top-right corner of the page and see what works best for your site. A/B testing is critical here in order to find the best possible placement for your “add to cart” button. Check out this page for [80 inspiring examples of “add to cart” buttons](#).



Tip#41 – Show me the money

Market research suggests that shopping cart abandonment, whereby users add things to their cart but subsequently fail to complete the transaction, can run as high as 75% in some online businesses. There are many reasons why people abandon their carts, and a lot of literature has been written on the topic, but one of the main culprits is “sticker shock”.

When the cost of shipping and/or applicable taxes is perceived to be excessive by the user, and they only find this out during the check-out process, a statistically very significant number of sales will be lost. Limit this effect by informing customers about shipping costs and taxes up-front, avoiding unpleasant surprises at the end of the process. Even if your products already include all applicable surcharges, state this clearly throughout your website rather than trying to give users a pleasant surprise later on.

Tip#42 - Show me your SSL certificates

Assuming that you are using SSL certificates on your website and that you are renewing them when they expire (which surely you are doing, right?), please don't hide references to them during checkout. SSL certificates, customer certifications, reliability certifications and any other assurances should be prominently displayed and are most effective close to the credit card input fields.

Unfortunately fear continues to be one of the main obstacles for online transactions, so any reassurance you can give your customers should be used to the fullest.

Tip#43 – Creative and interactive 404 error pages

The infamous 404 error message is an HTTP standard status code which basically indicates that the server could not find what was requested. Typos, wrong URLs or links to pages that have been recently removed from the site are typical sources of 404 errors. Since there is no web page to display, the web server sends a standard page that simply says “404 Page not found”.

Needless to say, this is rather frustrating for users who, in many cases, take their business elsewhere. Take the opportunity to make these pages fresh and original, and build in possibilities for the user to search for a different product, return to the homepage, or contact your support team. If you are looking for some inspiration, take a look at these [35 great examples of customized 404 error pages](#).



Tip#44 – Trinkets, surprises and free goodies

Everyone likes to get something for free. Seneca, the Roman philosopher, already pointed this out over 2.000 years ago: "***a gift consists not in what is done or given, but in the intention of the giver or doer.***"

Regardless of the actual monetary value of the gift, if we surprise our users from time to time with a little trinket or goodie their perception of our brand is likely to be significantly enhanced. Including free samples, stickers, key chains, pens, notebooks or similar items into packages is a cost-effective way of differentiating ourselves from our competitors and leaving a great impression on customers. Play it right, perhaps getting a partner or supplier to provide the promotional gifts, and it might even turn out to be free to you.

Tip#45 – Mine your search logs

Historical search statistics are a fancy little thing. They provide a unique insight into what your users are actually searching for on your site, and (-shock-) you might find a few surprises.

Online marketers typically delve into macro search market insights and global trends provided by Google or other companies, but many fail to do such an exhaustive analysis of searches performed on their own site at a micro level. Are your customers searching for products that you do not carry? Are they searching for products by colour? Go through your search logs with a fine tooth comb and you are likely to find some surprising ideas to boost your business.

Tip#46 – Incentivize user participation

Many website managers assume that their services are so cool, practical and sticky that users won't be able to take their hands off them. This doesn't mean that they are arrogant, or that the services aren't in fact cool and practical, it's just a natural tendency when developing new products and services.

The truth is that users are literally bombarded on a daily basis with things to do on each website they visit - updating their Facebook status, reviewing a book on Amazon, providing a comment on a blog or news site... - and eventually they become rather tired and prioritize their online interactions. So, if something like customer reviews is a central part of your online business, it might be a good idea to think about special incentives for users to get the ball rolling. Don't just expect things to happen, for example customers taking half an hour to write a product



review on your site, but a little bit of marketing magic might convince them that their time would be well spent doing so.

Encourage your customers, for example, to review products that they already own by offering them a chance to win something; if that something eventually reverts back to you (for example one year of free shipping or a tasty gift card) better still. Although the example in the case of online retailers is fairly obvious, this principle can be applied to any online business that depends on user participation (the essence of every web 2.0 business out there).

Tip#47 – Embrace bloggers

I am generally distrustful of traditional media companies that try to detach themselves from bloggers and other independent digital publishers by alluding to a fundamental superiority in content quality (in my opinion this is merely a desperate attempt to prevent further advertising dollars from fleeing to other cheaper – and often more effective – websites run by independent publishers with a significantly lower cost structure but I digress).

Most online business managers are perfectly aware that there are certain independent bloggers who carry a great deal of authority and influence in their sector. Whether it's [TechCrunch](#) for consumer-oriented Internet ventures, [Mattbites.com](#) for food or [The Sartorialist](#) for style and fashion, you should be aware of who is influential in your sector and get on their radar.

An interesting option is to run a joint contest or giveaway with them, which will provide your brand with extremely valuable exposure, but there are other attractive possibilities. Be creative, and don't be afraid to reach out to these cyber-celebrities. You really have nothing to lose, and at the very least they will know who you are.

Tip#48 – Don't be a penny pincher with images

If you sell a product in different colours or styles, simply informing the user about it just doesn't cut it. Paint companies, for example, offer close to 100 different shades of the colour white alone. [Visualexpert](#) claims that, under optimal laboratory conditions, the human eye can discriminate between 1 million different colours (combinations of hue, saturation and brightness).

With this in mind, it is highly likely that your interpretation of, say, the colour blue, will differ substantially from any other person's definition of the same colour. So, when shopping for a handbag or a pair of running shoes, the assertion "also



available in blue” really has little to no value for the average consumer. Something similar occurs with different styles (“this bag is also available with a shoulder strap”).

So, if a product from your catalogue is available in different styles or colours, it is much more effective to actually show pictures for each one so that the customer can have an accurate visual representation of what they are buying. Eliminating dabs of uncertainty for prospective clients is generally the most recommended course of action.

Tip#49 – Nurture your Facebook fan page

Facebook currently has over 500 million active users, half of which log on to the social networking site on any given day. It is quickly becoming an essential marketing and communications tool for online businesses, and it is definitely something which you should look into.

One of the main advantages of acquiring Facebook fans is that these users will become a captive audience for your messages, receiving your status updates through their Facebook wall until they decide to “un-friend” you. Although this is a double-edged sword, since users tend to frown upon excessive corporate updates, if you take care of what you communicate Facebook can quickly become a critical source of revenue for your online business.

Tip#50 – Provide context in category browsing

Browsing by category on a typical e-commerce site can be a dull ordeal. Typically category pages are little more than a never-ending list of crammed product tables, with little context, insufficient filtering options, and seldom effective when trying to find something in particular.

Category browsing can be useful if you just want to have a quick glance at the products available in that category, but generally after the fifth or sixth product one tends to become dizzy and either tries again or leaves the page altogether. Things need not be like this.

Add some context to your category pages, provide practical pagination options, allow users to filter results to narrow down their search and include relevant content. This is not only beneficial for organic search engine rankings but, if done correctly, should also improve the customer experience.



Tip #51 – Passion versus apathy

If you lose the passion for what you do, whether it be selling shoes or building the next big thing in social media, it is the time to move on.

I strongly believe that this applies not only to online businesses and entrepreneurial ventures, but really to any job at all. Boredom is perhaps the number one enemy of productivity, so if you start to become bored and the thrill to innovate is just not there anymore, the time might have come to step aside.

Stepping aside does not mean that you have failed, nor is it something to be ashamed of. In fact, often it is the cleverest move.

Tip #52 – Learn to say “no”

[Benjamin Coll](#), one of my Shopall co-founders, always asserted that a business becomes mature only once it learns to say “no”. That is when the company discovers its own path and does not have the pressing short-term urge to deviate from it for financial reasons. As a matter of fact, having read this publication, it is now your responsibility to decide which bits of advice you should follow and which ones you should just disregard.

Happy implementing.

