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Myth Busting:
## Eight Roadblocks to Internet Success Debunked

By Kevin M. Mitchell

Bill Walzak has been on all sides of the Web site debate – as a businessman needing to use the Internet to grow his business, and now as a consultant helping others create sites that work for them. He's heard about all the roadblocks, the reasons not to move wholeheartedly into what is to him a key component of retailing, and is able to effectively build the case that a great Web site is imperative to success in today's marketplace.

Walzak was inspired to create software in 1996 when he was trying to "level the playing field" on his own wholesale business. "I was a smaller distributor, and didn't have the manpower, but was competing against the big companies," he explains. "I wanted to use technology to do as much of the work as possible." He has consulted with, and worked for, hundreds of retailers, including many in MI. As president of Pro-Active Websites he offers turnkey solutions for retailers looking for easy-to-use Web sites to do whatever they need without spending a lot of time.

He's also more than familiar with the reasons small-business men and women come up with to *not* invest in their Web site – and themselves.

I'm doing fine without an Internet presence. Why should I bother?

"If you don't use the Internet, your ability to grow your business is going to be very limited," he says. "People want to check out your business online before they
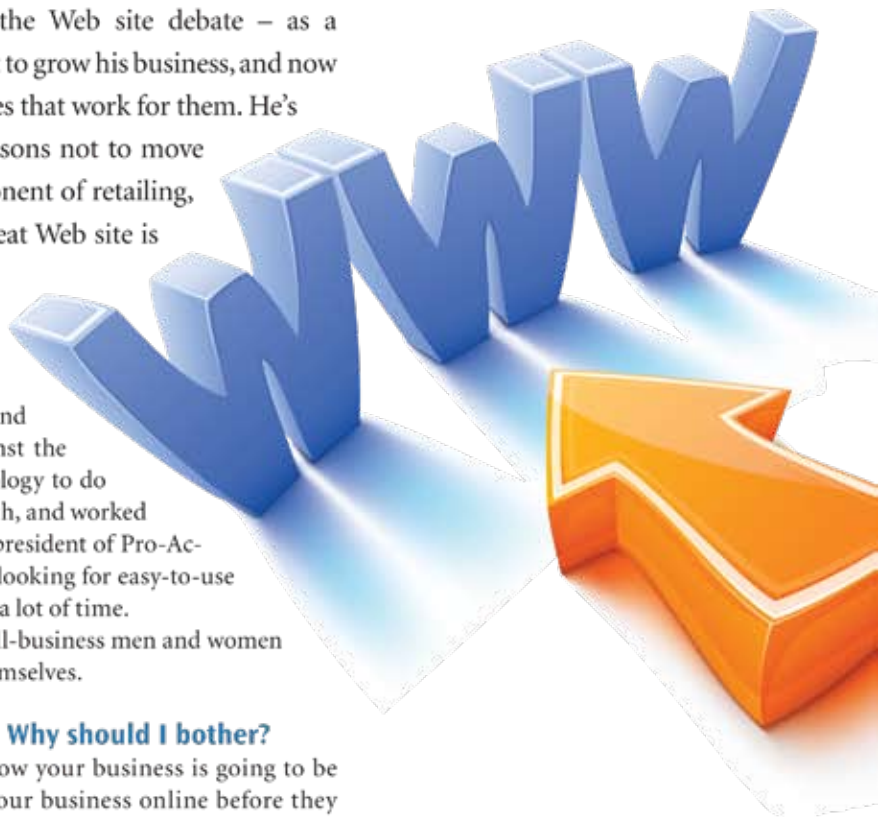
get in the car and drive. Many are just too busy for casual shopping, and need to know the possibilities of what you can do for them first, before they go to your store. And kids would rather cut their arm off than pull out the Yellow Pages!

"A dealer who doesn't think he needs the Internet is making a huge mistake."

Web sites are too technically difficult – and we just don't have time to deal with it.

"How many times have you stood at the cash register and spent a half hour trying to sell one $6 capo? And how much profit did you make? That same sale online would take seconds, and wouldn't require any personnel time.

"When creating or upgrading your store's Web site, a retailer needs to consider what is the best value, the best use of the staff's time. The Internet is the greatest communication tool available today, so it's more than worth the time you need to make for it. It really should be a priority."

As to the complexity, there are a lot of applications and approaches that are available. "Our motto is, if your mother can't operate the Web site we create for you, it needs to be redesigned."

I don't even know where to begin to look for a person or a company to build or redesign my Web site – let alone choosing one!

"For the majority of MI retailers, there's an advantage to having a turnkey solution. The first advantage is that you, the owner, always have the 'keys to the store.'" "Going with an individual or company, even on a contract basis, can create a situation where the retailer is "hostage" to someone else when changes need to

"If you don't use the Internet, your ability to grow your business is going to be very limited."

– Bill Walzak

be made. So when seeking out a Web site designer and builder, make sure it's someone who can create a system that's easy enough for you or a member of the staff to work.

Web sites are too expensive.

"We offer customers two systems: One is a very inexpensive e-commerce solution that allows retailers to automatically load up products from their suppliers in addition to adding pages about their store – that costs less than $.99 a day plus a one-time $50 setup fee." A superstore solution that costs more but has marketing tools is also available.

The retailer who shops and compares options, spends time researching and listening, will find a solution that

Web Marketing 101

"Most people believe that they need to spend most of their time building a Web site, when what they really need to do is spend their time marketing their Web site," says Bill Walzak of Pro-Active Websites. "Marketing is the most important part of the process because it's not what you sell, it's how you sell."

The days of just hanging out the proverbial shingle are gone, he states emphatically. "You can build a wonderful Web site with an extensive back-end system for ecommerce or whatever, but you've got to give them a reason to shop."

Retailers need to think of their Web site as what it is: another

"location." And what do you do when you launch a new location? Why, have a grand opening celebration, of course! Walzak says to drum up extra excitement with a giveaway. "Post a picture of a jar of picks on your site and have people email their guess as to how many picks are in it, with the winner getting a new guitar." With this simple idea, you've done yourself three favors: Customers are exposed to your world-class Web site; you've got potential customers' email address for future marketing campaigns; and you've instantly created a lot of traffic, which will raise your Search Engine Optimization (SEO) level, so when any-

body Googles "music instrument store + your town," your store will receive a higher ranking.

"Search engines will see that lots of people are going to the site, so it must be valuable," he says.

Beyond that, the possibilities are endless. "We have an affiliate code system that assigns a specific code to a school or church, so the retailer can then tell them that when they send customers to your site, either the customer gets a special five percent discount or that discount goes back to the church or school. That really builds goodwill, and the mutual support makes everybody successful."

is a good fit and won't break the bank – but it is an investment that is absolutely necessary in today's environment.

E-commerce? I can't possibly compete with Amazon or even Musician's Friend or Sam Ash!

"You have to pick your areas, your niche, to draw people in," Walzak says. "If you try to be everything to everybody, you'll lose. Find your expertise, your niche, and promote that."

For example, if you have an unusually large print music department with lots of rare or hard-to-find pieces, promote that. Build a community in that area, and soon customers will be in the habit of buying everything from you. "The Internet levels the playing field, and allows you to look as big as anybody else."

I have a wide variety of customers – from heavy metal kids to ministers to band and orchestra parents. How can I possibly create a Web site that serves them all?

"Every segment of your customer base should be represented and served on your site – you don't want to exclude anybody. So the Web site should reflect every aspect of your store." It might require extra time and thought, but so does the layout of your store. You have friendly and appealing entry into your store, and then you likely have different sections to appeal to more specific segments.

A well designed Web site can really appeal to specific segments even more than a well-merchandised brick and mortar store. A page dedicated to the church market can relay the message that you deal with houses of worship all the time; a page just for band and orchestra parents can make it so they are comfortable doing business with you, et cetera.

I hear a lot about "creating a community on the Web" – what does that really mean and how do I do it?

"First, stalk out your area of expertise, then have your Web site reflect that." It can be as simple as if you're primarily a folk/acoustic store, having the site look "folkie." Have the graphics, the font, everything about the look and feel of the site reflect that. Don't go for a generic approach.

"Another important part about building a community is including detail about your project that can only come from you, with your specific point of view reflected." Providing information through text, graphic, and videos contributes to your site being a "help center" that draws likeminded people who will make up your online community. "People want to come back to a resource. Selling product is the goal, but you also want something people can return to again and again because they see you and your site as a resource." Not everybody is going to buy a guitar every week, but if they know your site is a source for tips and even lessons, they will return for that – and end up buying accessories there in between those major instrument purchases.