

Christmas comes but once a year

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As I write this article there are sixteen weeks to go until Christmas. For most of us this won't be cause for any great concern, sixteen weeks is a long time away, still plenty of time left to stress over what to buy the man or woman who has everything and whose family's turn it is on Christmas day. But for retailers, particularly those with an on-line presence, sixteen weeks isn't a long time and they should already be gearing up for what promises to be a bumper Christmas on-line. Last year, in the UK alone, £949 million worth of orders were placed on-line in the last three weeks before Christmas and with on-line sales set to grow 46 per cent this year, from £7.1 billion in 2002 to £10.4 billion in 2003, there are great expectations for this Christmas.

However, for every on-line shopper who visits a web site, finds the Christmas present they are looking for and successfully makes the purchase, there could be a frustrated and ultimately disillusioned on-line shopper who doesn't. For every on-line shopper whose order turns up in time for them to hand over their Christmas present, there may be another whose gifts will arrive too late or even not at all. For although Internet shopping has come along away, there are still too many retailers who don't pay enough attention to their user's on-line experience or provide even basic levels of customer service. As a self confessed shopaholic I have whole heartedly embraced shopping on-line and have bought from many excellent sites, but on a regular basis I still come across sites that just don't work, resulting in my loss of patience and a loss of sales for those retailers.

There are really three main issues that any e-retailer needs to pay particular attention, particularly those gearing up for the Christmas rush - usability, technical reliability and customer service. Usability is a much talked about topic in the world of web design, after all it is the same as the most basic rule of commerce: give the customer what he wants in an easy way and he'll buy and come back. Ensuring good usability is something that should not only be undertaken in the initial web design phase but something that should be continually monitored and improved. Good on-line retailers regularly test the usability of their websites, request customer feedback and more importantly, act upon it.

Technical reliability is even more critical, sales and moreover brand value can be lost in an instant through missing links or error pages, particularly at the point of purchase stage. I recently spoke to one retailer, who shall remain anonymous, whose purchasing system broke down at the very last stage of the purchasing process. The result was scores of angry customers who thought that their order had been processed but were still waiting weeks later for delivery. On contacting the company they discovered the company had no record of their order. Those customers may now be reluctant to purchase from the company or indeed purchase on-line at all. Retailers need to review the technical reliability of their site, monitoring down time,

broken links and error pages and address any concerns with their suppliers. In the run up to Christmas when systems will undoubtedly be put to the test this is more important than ever.

Finally customer service, the best website in the world won't generate repeat business if stock isn't available, orders are delivered late or the customer can't get a response from the retailer. I am still amazed by the number of on-line retailers (and it must be said, companies in general for that matter) who fail to respond to e-mail requests for information on products, delivery dates or order queries. Staff in a store wouldn't dream of ignoring a customer who came up to them to ask for information or refuse to answer the telephone if it is ringing' yet many thousands of e-mails go unanswered every day. Offering excellent customer service is one of the ways that on-line retailers can differentiate themselves from their competitors and helps to ensure that their customers remain loyal.

I don't want to discourage the 18 million or so adults in the UK who have access to the Internet but have yet to make a purchase on-line from shopping on the Internet. The Internet does offer us a wider range of products than we usually have access to in the high street and in a way where we can quickly and easily shop around for the most competitive prices. At Christmas time especially, it can be much more pleasurable to be sitting at home in the warm in front of the PC with a glass of wine; given the alternative of being jostled by crowds of shoppers in the high street and confronted by endless queues at the checkout. When a website is designed built and maintained with the user in mind, the purchasing process is quick and easy, the systems are reliable and the goods are delivered on time, shopping on the Internet is an enjoyable experience. You only need to look at the growing success of Amazon.com whose site is built around the user's experience, where purchasing is simple and speedy and the level of customer service is excellent, to see that investment in usability, reliability and customer service pays dividends. Lets hope that this Christmas there are fewer shopping carts strewn across the web abandoned in frustration and more satisfied shoppers delighted with their Internet purchases.