



Ecommerce for Artists

An integrated, modular curriculum developed collaboratively by CraftNet member schools and artists as an introductory guide to establishing an entrepreneurial Web presence. Created with the generous support of the Appalachian Regional Commission.

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MODULE 8: Put the Customer at the Center

What is customer service, and how do I do it with an online business?

Customer service is at the center of any successful business. It trumps price cuts and sales promotions. It is the force that can keep customers coming back, and it is accomplished by keeping customers satisfied. The key to customer service is building a solid, trusting relationship between the customer and you.

Some tips for building your reputation for solid customer service in ebusiness include:

- Depend on doing, not simply saying you will do. (The corollary is “Keep your promises.”)
- Ensure that when visitors leave your site, they go away with a good feeling from having had a pleasant experience. A good start is to make sure that your site is easy to navigate.
- Be sure that your contact information is complete and easily found.
- If you have an online store, be sure that your shopping cart is easy to use.
- Provide your customer with an easy way to return artwork.
- Handle complaints promptly and in a way that makes the customer feel satisfied.
- When your customer contacts you, respond quickly.
- When a customer contacts you, pay close attention to what they are communicating.
- Ship purchases on time.
- Remember that your website’s FAQ (frequently asked questions) is very important.
- Go the extra mile.

Additional tips on customer service can be found at: www.technologyconcepts.biz or <http://sbinfoanada.about.com/od/customerservice/a/custservrules.htm>.

ACTIVITY: Visit the websites of several artists and based on the list above analyze the strength of their customer service. Use your analysis to decide on the elements that you will include on your site in order to ensure especially effective customer service.

What if the customer calls and says the item they bought never arrived or that it arrived broken?

When you ship, always ensure for the accurate value of the object! If it is your fault, replace the piece right away as it can only benefit you. If it is a problem caused by the shipping company, be active and thorough to get this resolved as quickly as possible.

If a piece arrives broken, ask the customer to keep the shipping container and packing materials, because they usually are required to make a claim. It may be necessary to prove that you packed the purchase correctly. Even though you may have to wait for the claim to be paid, it will serve you well to ship the customer another item ASAP if another is available. If it is a high-dollar object, you may need to discuss with the customer the need to settle the claim before proceeding. You may simply have to make a judgment call.

What if the customer wants to return the item because after seeing it, they don't like it?

Before you begin to sell, you need to develop a policy for returns in situations like this. Having a customer want to return something that they don't like is a matter of *when*, not *if*. Thinking about this issue in advance and putting it into print in the form of an established policy will be helpful so you won't be caught off-guard.

All that having been said, it is usually a sound approach to be very willing to take returns after seeing that the piece is not damaged. Remember the caveats of customer service?

Who pays for return shipping if a customer returns a piece and I agree to replace it?

The answer to this will vary with the circumstances. For example, there is a huge difference in shipping a piece of pottery and shipping a piece of furniture. Again, this is a situation in which there needs to be a policy in place before the purchase.

So you keep saying that I need a return/shipping policy. What makes a good return policy?

A good shipping policy is a fair one—both to you and to the customer. To start shaping your policy, you should be able to answer the following questions:

- Will you accept returns?
- Do you need to know why the object is being returned?
- What is the time limit in which a customer can return something? A 30-day return policy is generally accepted as fair. However, whatever the timeframe, it needs to be displayed prominently.

- Will you accept a return after the object has been used?
- Will you accept a broken object as a return?
- What is the customer's duty in the return process?
- To what address should the returned item be shipped?
- Who is going to pay for the product to be shipped back? And, if you choose to pay for the shipping, what are the circumstances? Some artists have a policy that provides for the customer to pay for shipping when the item is ordered. If the customer doesn't like the object and sends it back, then they pay for the return shipping. If the artist sends back another item, the artist pays for the shipping.
- How will the customer receive a refund?
- Will you charge a fee for restocking?

You need to use your best judgment to play the returns game. If the back and forth in a situation looks endless, experienced artists advise, "Cut your expenses and return the money." You also might want to check the tips at <http://returnpolicies.net>.

ACTIVITY: Using the points above, write your own return policy for your online business.

As a service to my online customers, should I send out an e-newsletter?

An e-newsletter allows you the opportunity to communicate with your customers on a regular basis. You can choose to send out your e-newsletter monthly, quarterly, or only before special holidays. The benefits of an e-newsletter are that it can:

- Be a cost-effective way of communicating with your customers.
- Open opportunities to reach your customers and invite their response.
- Save money instead of sending a hard-copy newsletter.
- Help to build your company's look and reputation.
- Retain customers who have proven to be buyers.

Remember, the e-newsletter can take any form that matches your business goals and coordinates well with the level of effort required to produce it. It could range from a single sheet to a number of pages in length. It can carry your logo, provide descriptive information about what shows you will be attending, or introduce new objects that you have created.

You need to remember, however, that most people really hate receiving spam in their inbox. It is a better idea to develop a mailing list by asking your customers to "opt in" or subscribe to your newsletter. Also, your customers will appreciate having a simple way to "opt out" if they decide that they don't want to receive the e-newsletter any longer.

Other benefits can be found at <http://www.evancarmichael.com/Business-Coach/223/The-Top-Ten-Benefits-Of-An-ENewsletter-According-To-Your-Strategic-Thinking---Business-Coach.html>.

ACTIVITY: Design and write a trial issue of an e-newsletter that you could use for your ebusiness. Be sure to keep your writing brief and yet informative. You also will want to include several photographs or other images. Keep in mind that an e-newsletter doesn't have to be lengthy to have a positive impact.

If so, how do I set up enrollment?

As a start, you ask visitors to your website if they would like to sign up to receive an e-newsletter. Here is a great place to use a form, because the visitor can fill in all the necessary information and it can be added to your email list. Remember also to include a way for subscribers to unsubscribe.

Moreover, you also can use the contact list that you have been collecting over the time you have been open for business, as well as sending it to anyone who previously has shown an interest in your art.

Should I charge for a "membership" to receive a newsletter?

It probably wouldn't be the best use of your time to try to charge for receiving a newsletter. A newsletter is just one more way to keep in touch with your customers and to introduce new work. An e-newsletter makes such outreach very affordable because there are no printing or mailing costs.

How can I make sure that my site is accessible to the widest possible audience, and why is that important?

Accessibility, which involves making your website usable by individuals with disabilities, is both important and complicated. It is important to have an accessible site to in order to demonstrate your desire to serve all customers.

There are a number of ways to help make your site usable for a more diverse group of customers:

- Use "Alt text" which provides blind customers with audio descriptions of onscreen visual images.
- Be sure to use a spell checker and avoid misspellings, which confuse readers.
- Try to avoid abbreviations if at all possible. Again, a screen reader can't read them and gets confused.
- Beware of low-contrast colors that make text hard to read. Dark text on a white background is the most readable.
- Input text that can be resized onscreen by the reader to meet their specific needs. Not only partially sighted people but also an aging population makes this flexible capability especially important.
- Make sure that your links make sense if they happen to be read out of context.

If you want to learn more about accessibility, check sites like www.webaim.org, www.accessify.com, or www.diveintoaccessibility.org. Free technical assistance is available at www.ada.gov/publicat.htm.

I have heard the term “target market.” What does that mean, and do I need to worry about it?

Successful businesses determine how to predict which types of customers are the most likely to buy their goods. Such an effort results in a win-win situation. The customer is put at the center of the effort to sell goods, and the business owner gains access to willing and receptive buyers. Ebusiness is not any different. Too often there is the temptation to take the shotgun approach to determining who your target market is because there is the mistaken notion that targeting a broader, less specific market demographic will result in more sales. Such campaigns can be expensive and their results generally fall short in expected sales.

You need to describe your target market as clearly and completely as possible. You might want to consider:

- Gender.
- Age.
- Place of residence.
- Profession.
- Income category.
- What forms of recreation do they enjoy?
- Where do they shop?
- Education.

As you work on identifying your target customers, keep in mind that markets shift over time. For example, there is today a growing movement to “buy local” or to be “green.” If you want to pursue that emphasis in your business, you may need to for your marketing efforts more regionally, taking care to keep a finger on the pulse of how local fine handcraft sells to visiting cultural tourists.

To identify your best potential customer groups, you need to do some research that will paint a clearer portrait of who they really are, including their buying preferences when it comes to craft. For example, you may want to access and review the demographic survey completed by CODA (www.codacraft.org/pages/survey) or peruse studies done by the Americans for the Arts (www.artsusa.org).

ACTIVITY: Research your potential market and create a written description of your target customer.

In order to better meet my customers' specific needs, should I accept commissions?

Commissioned art pieces are created for a buyer, who may well want to provide input about the design, the color, and, of course, the price of the piece. Whether or not you should accept commissions will depend on how you feel about receiving input as you create your art.

To avoid problems later on, you need to have an understanding with the buyer before you start the project. Be sure that you talk about the following:

- What are the buyer's expectations? The expectations of what the artwork will include need at some point to be written down.
- What are the payment terms? Quote a set price for what has been commissioned and then set up a payment system: either one-half paid at the beginning of the work and the balance on delivery or one-third at the beginning, one-third part way through, and one-third on delivery. The initial payments should be yours to keep, even if the buyer changes their mind.
- What is the time frame for completion? Provide the buyer with progress reports during the various stages of the project.
- What is the allowance for changes? To avoid any chance of trying to respond to multiple last-minute changes, be sure either to limit the number of free changes you are willing to make after the piece is completed or quote a fee for what you will charge for each change.
- What are the expectations for preparing the piece for display? Is that cost included in the initial price?
- Who pays for shipping and insurance?
- Who will own the rights to the piece? For example, does the artist retain the right to show a photograph of the work, even after it has been sold? Can you reuse and sell the same, or a very similar, design?

For more information about working on commission, visit sites such as www.artbusiness.com/privcom or <http://emptyeasel.com>.