

# **Website Automation**

## ***The Key To Online Success!***

*by Kaviraj Kodai*



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## Introduction to website automation

In only a short period of time the internet has exploded from being a limited tool to being one of life's necessities. The internet used to be reserved for academic, government and research use, but now it is a public domain that is used by people all over the world from every walk of life. Over seventy percent of adults and almost ninety percentage of teenagers say they use the internet on a regular basis. The internet is used for everything from shopping to banking to playing games and chatting with friends. The demand for high quality online content means that webmasters have to keep their websites up to date and accurate.

In order to stay competitive, websites must maintain high quality standards. A business without a strong online presence will quickly fade away. Strength and high quality comes from having updated website content, user friendliness and taking advantage of the many tools that can aid a webmaster in keeping in contact with their customers and ensuring customer satisfaction.

In the beginning, a website was dull. It basically existed to provide information to those skilled enough to navigate its pages. It wasn't user friendly and it didn't have any special graphics, add ins or anything to make it attractive. People would visit a website because it had the information they needed, not because it caught their attention or was interesting. There was not a lot of competition because internet access was very limited. Nowadays, though, with the internet being so popular there is plenty of competition. Websites have to be easy to use, be attention grabbing and provide quality content. Websites have to be up to date and make use of automation features that help keep the website current and interesting to the customers.

Website automation is the use of special programs and other tools to manage website information. Some examples of website automation are search engines and shopping carts. Automation helps both the webmaster and the visitor. It helps to cut down on the time an owner spends having to do things like taking orders and updating customer databases. For the visitor automation means quick and easy use of the website. Website automation makes a website more attractive to visitors and much easier to manage for the owner.

Website automation is something that the typical webmaster will probably be unable to do himself. Creating website automation requires extensive knowledge into programming. Most webmasters instead use programs that come with a pre-built automation system. The webmaster simply chooses the software program that has the automation features he desires, installs it onto his website and the task is done. Website automation software has made website automation something any webmaster can do.

Website automation management offers many benefits. The largest of which is freeing up the webmaster's time. The automation system can handle routine tasks like data backup, user registration and news syndication. These are necessary tasks that can be tedious and take up a lot of time, but that can now be done by the automated system. Website automation can also help the website visitor tailor the website to meet their needs. Automation systems allow users to change the visual layout of the website, post comments, interact with other visitors and make purchases. Website automation offers many benefits but it also brings up the issue of safety. Automation systems require user information to be stored. Any information the user enters needs to be protected. Most automation software programs come with built in security features that offers protection to users. Webmasters can create their own security features, but it takes a lot of programming knowledge to do so. It is best to choose a software package that has built in security. By doing this the only thing a webmaster has to do is keep current with the software manufacturer so they can download new patches as they come out. Once they register their copy of the software the manufacturer will automatically send updates via email, so really the webmaster can sit back and enjoy their automated website without anything else to do.

Website automation also provides the benefit of being able to transfer information to different servers. The automation system allows usage on any server, so as the website grows and the demands require an additional or different server, the webmaster can easily transfer the information and keep from having downtime on their website. User information is also kept secure and there is no worry about losing any information in the transfer process.

Webmasters should understand the basics about how automation systems work, how to install them and how to

keep them maintained. Most businesses will use automation systems that run on the web server or web browser. Only large systems, usually for large corporate needs, must have a dedicated server for their automation system.

The typical website will use a website automation system that is called a “server side” or “client side” system. A server side system has tools that run on the server while client side systems run in the browser. Sometimes server side and client side are both used in a system. The choice of which to use is really up to the webmaster. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages. Client side systems are usually easier to install and do not interfere with server load, but some functions cannot be handled by client side systems. Server side systems may increase server load and be a little more difficult to install, but they are necessary to keep information secure.

There are many things to consider when implementing website automation. Besides the type of automation system used, a webmaster will have to consider which automation tools to use. They will have to ensure that safety is handled and that the automation tools help the customer. Website automation should make the experience better for the customer and easier on the webmaster. If implementing website automation does not accomplish these goals then something is not right and the webmaster needs to re-evaluate their system.

This section has provided some general information about website automation tools. In the next sections website automation will be described and defined more in depth. Sections will include information on types of website automation tools, how webmasters can use them and the functions they add to a website.

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## Autoresponders and Mailing list systems.

In the earlier days of the internet, email was the primary basis for online communications. People would hold discussions and carry out other business through email. Using email was a slow process, though. It took time for each email to be sent from person to person and the interaction was not immediate. Today message boards and online chats have taken the place of these types of email communications. Message boards and online chats are instant communications. People talk in realtime and do not have to wait for delivery of their message like with emails. Email is still vital, though, and used just as much today as ever. Email is used more now for notifications and getting information to people. These types of email communications do not need the back and forth conversation, so they work great for business use. Email lists can be a great tool for getting information to customers quickly.

### **The impact of listserv**

The idea of automated mailing lists began in 1986. Eric Thomas created Listserv, the first automated mailing list system. Before 1986, email lists had to be manually managed, which was time consuming and actually hindered the maximum abilities of email lists. Manual management included signing up and registering customers, sending each email to each customer and then following up with any customer emails that came in after the delivery. Listserv made list management much easier, thus improving the usability. With Listserv the lists allowed users to register their list, set options and had automated monitoring. There is many different email list management software on the market, but Listserv remains the leader. Listserv, formally copyrighted by L-Soft, is now a common term used to refer to any email list management system.

### **Making good use of email lists**

The use of email lists is a great tool for a webmaster to use for instant notification of important information to customers. Information like specials, new products or account activity can all be sent via email lists. Email lists help a webmaster stay in contact with customers. It is a well know fact that repeat business is very important and by staying in contact with customers, it helps to gain that repeat business. Besides the convenience of email lists, they are also very cost efficient when compared to other methods a webmaster may use.

Email lists contain a host of tools that make sending email notifications simple. The typical email list will include a message scheduler to help ensure messages get out in time, global distribution which means the webmaster sends an email one time and it reaches all the customers on the list, and built in archives for keeping track of emails that have been sent, which is also great if a customer requests for a resend of an email. These lists also may have a spam tester which helps to ensure the email will reach the customers in box and not their bulk or spam folder where they may never even see it and bounced email handling which will delete emails that are no longer operating from the list.

### **Dealing with the spam issue**

Email lists are not without a downside. The biggest problem with email lists is email spam. Spam is unsolicited emails and many email providers now offer built in spam protection which sends unrecognized emails to a bulk or spam folder where they are often deleted without ever being opened. Spam has become the biggest downfall of email lists. Spam is such a problem the government is fighting it with the CAN SPAM Act of 2003.

Webmasters who use email lists must comply with the CAN SPAM Act. If a business gets associated with spam it could be very bad for business. They can also be fined, but the damage done to the reputation of the business is far worse. People are annoyed by spam email and they will take great measures to ensure they do not have to be bothered with it. They also look down upon those who do it, so a business that gets a reputation for spamming will face a loss of business.

Fortunately for webmasters there are some easy ways to comply with the CAN SPAM Act. One method is to use a double opt email list. A double opt in list means the customer registers for the list and then must confirm their

registration via an email. If they do not confirm then they are not added to the list. Double opt lists help ensure that the person who owns the email address is really the one who signed up and that they are interested in receiving email from the website. Another thing for a webmaster to do is to include a link in every email that allows the person to unsubscribe from the list. Additionally, the emails should also include all of the business contact information. As mentioned, most email providers now offer spam protection. These filters are not 100% perfect, though. They sometimes block mail from legitimate senders. How they work is basically by blocking mail from senders who are not approved by the email owner. In some cases, the filters only filter out certain emails that fit the typical spam email model. In any case, a webmaster could still end up having their emails lost in customers spam folders due to the inconsistency of spam filters. If a webmaster uses a list with a built in spam tester then they can avoid the hassle of having emails that are not getting to inboxes or that are being reported as spam.

### **Using autoresponders to save time**

Mailing lists are only one option in instant customer notification. Email auto responders allow customers to request information as they need it or for information to be sent as the webmaster desires. Autoresponders work when a customer sends an email to the auto responder email address. This triggers the auto responder and a pre-written email is then sent automatically to the customer. Auto responders work great for notifications like letting customers know their order was received. There are two major types of email auto responders. The type of auto responder a webmaster uses will be based upon the needs, the set up and the desired response time. There are both email based and web based autoresponders. Email based runs from the webmasters email account, where web based runs from an independent website. There are two models of email auto responder and one model of web based autoresponders. The basic email based auto responder runs directly from the webmaster's email. It does not offer a lot of choices or options about setting up emails or formatting responses. Basically whenever a customer send an email to the email address they get an automatic response that the webmaster has written and set to automatically respond to emails received. This is fine if this email address is only used for one particular reason. Otherwise, customers, or anyone else for that matter, will be getting the same response every time they email this address. The best use for this type of auto responder is to let customers know their email has been received and someone will get back to them shortly with a response. This would probably work for a small business that has a limited number of customers. The emails would have to be checked regularly and the inquiries handled quickly by the webmaster.

Another type of email based auto responder is a mail server auto responder. This works like the first type, except it allows a response as soon as the server receives the message. This is much quicker than waiting for the email client to receive the message. With an email client the message is delayed because it is received by the client first and then redirected to the appropriate email address, but with the mail server the message is received as soon as it is sent because it does not have to go through the redirection like an email server. The web based email auto responder is much different than the email based types. A web based auto responder is an independent email that is run from the auto responder website. They can usually be set to respond in different ways depending upon the message received. These types of auto responders can also be set to send out mail at certain times. Web based auto responders offer a lot more choices and options than email based. They also require far less work for the webmaster. Once the webmaster has the auto responder set up they just allow it to do its job and only have to update it as needed.

Web based email autoresponders often come with many options. They may offer the ability to include attachments, like with an email based auto responder. They offer the choice of sending HTML or text emails, also like with an email based auto responder. They offer automated subscription where the customer signs up for the service and the auto responder registers them and adds them to the list without and manual work on the webmasters part. Email based autoresponders do not usually offer this type of service. They may also offer statistic records, which also are not typical of email based autoresponders. This section has covered how email lists and email autoresponders work to keep a business and its customers in contact without a lot of work on the webmasters part. These tools offer an invaluable resource for a business and can make a big difference in customer relations. The next section will take a look at a great way to build a business through using affiliate marketing.

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- Analyze your profitability with detailed autoresponder statistics.
- A double opt-in system to protect you from false spam complaints.
- Unlimited custom data fields, so all you have to do is ask to gather info about your subscribers.
- Blog RSS broadcaster that will allow you to have your new blog entries automatically emailed to your autoresponder subscribers.
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## Affiliate program managers

Affiliate marketing programs are very popular on the internet. A person can find affiliate marketing programs associated with even big name businesses. This is because they are a good system that works to draw in customers and help a business expand its online presence. The idea for affiliate marketing is credited to Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon.com. However, other companies had used the basic idea before Amazon did. The first to actually use affiliate marketing were the adult websites, but this is often overlooked for the more favorable idea that Jeff Bezos created the idea. No matter who really came up with the idea, it is a good one that has become quite important to online business.

### **How affiliate marketing works**

Affiliate marketing is basically when companies use other companies or individuals to market their products for a commission fee. Affiliate marketing works because both those who are marketing the products and the business that manufactures the products are making money. Many people simply sign up as affiliates with various companies and find they make a lucrative income doing so.

Affiliate marketing programs are set up by the business. The business owner will determine what products will be available through their affiliate marketing program and how much commission is offered for each product. To sign up for the program, people will have to enter some personal information. They will then get materials they can use to sell the products. Many affiliate marketing programs also allow affiliates to sign up new affiliates and earn commission off their sales, as well as their own sales. The affiliates then advertise the business and make sales on the businesses behalf. The affiliate is then paid commission on the sales they make.

### **The benefits of affiliate marketing**

Affiliate marketing from the webmasters stand point is a great advertising method. It is low cost and very effective. The webmaster has their products being sold and marketed on various websites. They are in effect getting advertising for a fraction of what it would cost to display ads on these websites. In return for this cheap advertising they simply offer a small commission on each sale that the affiliate website brings in. Besides advertising benefits, affiliate marketing works on the concept of customer loyalty. These affiliate websites all have their own customer base and their customers are likely to trust them and therefore buy from companies they back as an affiliate. It works a lot like word of mouth advertising, which is known to be quite effective. People like to give business to companies that they can trust, so with affiliate marketing a webmaster is getting that built trust by affiliation. Additionally, in most cases the affiliates themselves are buying the companies products and becoming a loyal customer themselves.

The affiliates get benefits, too. In some cases they can use affiliate marketing to boost their own sales. By having a link to a popular businesses website, they may get higher search engine rankings, which means increased traffic. Also, the commissions they make is an extra stream of income.

### **Implementing an affiliate program**

Due to the fact that affiliate marketing costs nothing up front to either the webmaster or the affiliate, a webmaster can set up as many affiliates as they wish. Once they've established their affiliate marketing program they provide the information and start signing up affiliates. All for no cost, just a little time investment. Creating an affiliate marketing program can be done in different ways. Automated affiliate marketing programs are software programs that provide the webmaster with an affiliate program that is already set up. All they have to do is input some details and it is ready to go. These programs track the sales for each affiliate, automatically handle sign ups and keep everything recorded. The webmaster just has to set the details and the program is ready to go.

Automated affiliate marketing programs have many benefits. They allow a webmaster to monitor the performance of affiliates, so if an affiliate is not producing results they can be helped or cut from the program. It helps to monitor the effects of affiliate marketing and how it increases business and sales. Automated programs

also allow a webmaster to set commissions per product and to monitor commissions paid out. These programs make signing up for the affiliate program easier and usually include tools that keep affiliates informed about information they need to know. Overall, an automated program allows the webmaster to monitor what is happening in their affiliate program without requiring a large amount of time spent doing it.

Without an automated affiliate program a webmaster is going to have to do a lot of work. First they will have to sign up each affiliate, which includes having a database of their personal information and sales records. Every sale will have to be tracked manually. This can be difficult because it would require the customer to enter the affiliate id which is something many customers do not do or want to do. Additionally, the webmaster would have to calculate each affiliate's earnings. Doing an affiliate program manually is very time consuming. It also is not as beneficial to affiliates since a sale would be easily lost or their id would not be attached to every sale they make. It is just much easier to use an automated program.

This section has covered affiliate marketing and how using an affiliate program manager to set up an affiliate program can be beneficial. Affiliate marketing is a good way to build a loyal customer base. In the next section, customer support systems will be covered so webmasters can learn how website automation can help them keep their growing customer base happy.

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- Automate the affiliate registration process.
- Automated promotional materials for affiliates.
- Choose any domain you wish to run the Affiliate Program Manager from.
- Take advantage of our built-in affiliate ad tracker.
- 2checkout.com, clickbank.com and paypal.com are fully integrated to give you more flexibility... and more payment processors are being added.
- Lead your affiliates to more profits with a special Affiliate mailer that ONLY contacts them.
- Train your affiliates by automatically adding their email address to any autoresponder of your choice.
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## Customer support systems

The relationship between a company and the customer is of up most importance. A customer who has a bad experience with a company will not likely result in repeat business and will likely tell others about their bad experience, causing them to reconsider doing business with the company. This can do a lot of damage to a company's sales. Repeat business accounts for a majority of a company's sales, this is a known business fact. Additionally, new customers are often a result of word of mouth advertising, where the new customer heard about the company through a friend, family member or associate. By losing these two crucial aspects of their customer base a company can experience a huge hit to their profits. So, the bottom line is that companies must have a good customer support system in place to handle all their customers needs and keep them happy.

### **Defining customer relationship management**

Customer relationship management, also referred to as CRM, is another word for customer service. It is the monitoring and handling of the customers. The world of internet business has greatly changed how CRM is accomplished. Buying habits of the customers are different and the general relationship between the customers and the company is different. This has led to an almost alienation of the customer, where they are left to find answers to their own questions or to handle problems through a series of email messages. In many ways, this has created bad CRM for online business. This is why it is important for webmasters to ensure they have some system of CRM where they actually connect with their customers on a more personal, non-electronic level. Having this personal connection can seem difficult for a webmaster. Websites are likely to receive many visitors in one day, far more than a traditional business. The webmaster has to find a way to make each customer feel welcome and feel as if they can get personal attention if needed. CRM systems can help to do this.

### **The challenge of online business**

Unlike traditional business, online business is done without any face time between the business and the customer. This lack of personal involvement can lead a customer to feeling isolated. Business is largely dependent upon how the customer feels about their shopping experience. Convenience is one of the biggest reasons people shop online, but it is the companies that have good, strong customer service that keep customers coming back. A customer needs attention. They need to have problems addressed, questions answered and feel as if the business actually values them as a customer. That is why CRM is so important, especially in online business.

One of the biggest downfalls in CRM online is organizing and keeping track of customer issues. Tracking customer support issues is very important. By keeping track of them this allows the company to stay on top of their customers needs, respond as needed in an appropriate time and make sure the issue gets resolved. When a webmaster is receiving dozens or more inquires form customers each day it can be easy to lose track of them. Each customer deserves to get a response and get one promptly. A customer whose inquiry goes unanswered will most likely avoid doing business with the company again. A webmaster has to have some type of system in order to ensure every inquiry is answered promptly.

There is software that can be used to make this process go smoothly. This software also allows the customer to check their inquiry and see the status, like if it has been looked at, responded to or anything else that has happened with it. Tracking customer support issues is the best way to ensure that customers are getting the attention they need and that issues are being resolved quickly and competently.

### **Creating a customer support system**

A customer support system on a website can be constructed in many ways. In general, the customer support page of a website will include a frequently asked questions list that addresses common questions and concerns that customers have and some type of area that allows customers to ask their own questions and receive answers. This area could be a ticket system where the customer enters their personal information to register

and then enters their question or concern, the ticket is then sent to the customer support staff and an answer is returned via email. It could also be a live chat area where customers can talk with customer support staff in real time via a chat room. No matter the specifics, the customer support system should allow for customers to get answers to their questions quickly and easily.

Customer support systems can be either email based or ticket based. Email based systems are where the customer clicks an email link on the customer support page, which brings up their personal email account. The email is already set up with the address and usually the subjectline. The customer then types in their request and sends it to the company. This type of support system is nice for a webmaster who needs to save bandwidth space or who does not get a lot of customer inquiries. A ticket based system is basically a form on the customer support page that the customer fills out. They will usually have to give their name and email address, along with a space where they can write their question or comment. These are very convenient for the customer and allows the webmaster to stay on top of inquiries.

The main idea of a customer support system is to make it easy for the customer to communicate with the webmaster. The system used should be monitored for effectiveness and usability. If communications are getting lost, not be handled promptly or being ignored then the system has failed. It takes some effort on the part of the webmaster to make sure they are using the system to the full advantage. A customer support system can only help make things easier they cannot handle the problems or questions a customer has. This is a really important point that a webmaster has to understand. Nothing will take the place of their personal attention that each customer deserves.

Customer support will help keep customers satisfied with an online business. In the next section, Really Simple Syndication or RSS will be discussed. RSS feeds are another way online businesses stay connected to their customers and help improve customer satisfaction.

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## Really simple syndication (rss)

Really Simple Syndication or RSS feeds are a way for websites to keep users up to date and informed. RSS feeds provide current news and information via a feed from the website. RSS feeds can be coded onto a website and users can get the feeds through a news aggregator. An RSS feed looks like a list of files. These files are articles from the RSS feeds a person is subscribed to. The RSS feed displays current and upto the minute information from the website where it is coming from. There are a few different formats of RSS. A website owner should try to choose one that is popular and that will ensure their users will be able to access their feeds. Currently the best RSS formats are UserL and or RSS-DEV Working Group. Both provide different versions and can be simple or more complex as needed. They are both user friendly and easy to set up for the webmaster.

RSS feeds are used by large and small companies. They are used as a way to keep customers informed of important information and happenings within the company. So many people using the internet are familiar with RSS feeds and use them on a regular basis, that it is one of the greatest opportunities to stay in contact with customers. The large companies know this and small businesses need to start taking advantage of it.

### **Understanding rss aggregators**

An aggregator, sometimes called a news aggregator or feed reader is the tool a user needs to be able to receive and read RSS feeds. Without an aggregator the RSS feed will be impossible to read. It will look like programming code. The aggregator will read the code, display the feeds and make reading the feeds easy. Using an aggregator allows a person to receive feeds from many different websites so they have them all in one place without having to check each individual website. The user has to access or download the aggregator in order to read the RSS feeds.

There are different types of aggregators a user can use. Online aggregators are offered for free. They are usually provided by internet service providers. A benefit of this type of aggregator is that they can be used from anywhere the user accesses the internet. They are not tied to the users computer. There are also aggregators which are downloaded and appear as part of the web browser. Lastly, there are portal aggregators that run on search engines and some other types of websites that are not user specific, meaning the user does not actually subscribe to the feeds. Every website has the option of displaying their RSS feed on their own website using this technology.

### **Benefits of rss feeds**

As it relates to website automation, RSS feeds are great as an automation tool. They allow webmasters to provide customers with live updates. They are much different than email lists, in that users subscribe to the feeds and get the information when they want, instead of being handed the information when the webmaster wants. They can reach multiple users with only a minimal amount of work on the webmasters end. Additionally, by providing RSS feeds a webmaster increases the chances of repeat business. This is because the RSS feed provides a direct link back to their website, so if the user did not bookmark the website they can still easily find it. The RSS feeds are presented to the customer every day, any time that they wish to access them. They provide an ideal opportunity to stay connected and draw customers in to buy.

RSS feeds beat other means of delivering information because they are easy for the customer to use and provide current and accurate information continuously. RSS feeds keep customers and businesses connected.

### **Adding an rss feed to a website**

Webmasters can add RSS feeds to their website by inserting the proper coding and linking to the files they would like in their feed. Customers connect to the feeds by clicking on the RSS feed symbol on the businesses website. This symbol usually says 'RSS feed' and is most often orange in color. Sometimes an RSS feed is displayed as an orange button with the letters 'XML'. XML is the formatting used in RSS feeds. After adding an RSS feed it is important that the webmaster keeps it current and filled with content. Customer that have subscribed to the feed are looking for new information on a regular basis. The webmaster may publish articles

or simply send out announcements on specials and sales. Whatever information they choose to publish has to be kept up to date or the customers will likely unsubscribe.

### **Maintaining an RSS feed**

As mentioned, keeping the RSS feed content current is important. Additionally, a webmaster will want to monitor their feed to ensure customers are subscribing. They should put the RSS feed in a prominent place on their website to ensure that customers know it is available. They should also make it enticing to the customer so they have a reason to subscribe. This could be done by saying special sales will be offered via the RSS feed, for example. It is also important for the webmaster to make sure the feeds are working properly at all times. They can subscribe to their own feed and check it regularly to make sure that the content is updating and the feeds are working correctly. They may also wish to check any links included to make sure they are working correctly. This is really important so the webmaster can ensure he is getting the most benefit from the RSS feed.

RSS feeds provide a fast way to connect with customers. They allow a webmaster to keep customers up to date on what is happening with the business. RSS feeds provide the benefit of giving the business 'facetime' with the customer so they are familiar with the customer, thus increasing the chance that the customer will keep doing business with the company. RSS feeds are often considered a form of advertising because they are always keeping the connection between customers and a business. In the next section the topic of ad tracking will be discussed. Ad tracking is a way for a business to make sure they are reaching potential customers and that their advertising efforts are effective.

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- Syndicate your follow-up and archived messages.
- Perfect for single opt-in, unlike email autoresponders that can get you in trouble.
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## Ad tracking systems

Web advertising is a whole new world for a business owner. The worldwide web is a huge resource with almost endless opportunities and possibilities. Unfortunately, as businesses have many opportunities to advertise, users have just as many, if not more, possibilities for places to shop. Broken down, what this means is that for a business to successfully advertise on the internet, the owner must know the basics about web advertising. He must be able to know how to reach his target market and the best way to do it. Web advertising can be very successful or a huge flop, depending upon how it is handled.

### Defining the target market

A business's target market are people who are likely to need and buy the products the business is selling. One of the best methods of defining a target market online is through the use of keywords. Keywords are used when a person does a search on a search engine. A keyword can be one word or a short phrase or combination of words. A webmaster must clarify what keywords are important to their business so they can then go about advertising for those keywords and reach their target market.

### Types of online advertising

There are many ways to advertise online. A webmaster can place ads, link to other websites, start an affiliate program, use email and message board signatures or try a number of other creative ways. There are both free and paid advertising opportunities. The choice is really dependent upon what works for the business. Search engines are often heavily relied upon by websites to get their site traffic. Search engines can be great, but getting a high ranking is often difficult and a tedious task to manage. Other advertising methods can be just as effective, and involve a lot less hassle. Pay per click advertisements utilize the popularity of search engines, but eliminate the task of trying to keep a website at the top of the rankings. Pay per click advertisements are displayed on search engine results pages and directly linked to keywords. When a user does a search for the specific keyword, the pay per click advertisements come up on the page, usually at the side or top. The webmaster only pays for advertisement when a user clicks on their ad. They do not have to pay for every time it is displayed. This can be a cost effective method of advertising. Other advertising methods, like placing ads, can be hit or miss. The reason is that just as a webmaster is trying to get traffic to their site, so are the websites he is advertising on. To make really good use of placing ads a webmaster has to research the websites and make sure their target market will visit the website. Otherwise, the ad will be useless. The key to advertising really isn't the type of ad, but rather where it is located. The idea is to place ads where the target market will see them. Like search engines and pay per click, the webmaster knows their target is going to see their ads because they are linked to keywords. That is why these types of advertising are so popular.

### Reaching the target market

One of the best means to ensure the target market is being reached is through ad tracking. Ad tracking is the method of recording and watching the response from ads placed online. There are many ad tracking systems available that can be integrated into an advertising campaign. Ad tracking systems allow a webmaster to see how each and every one of his ads are performing. This way the effective ads can be maintained and the less effective ads can be removed. It helps to save money and maximize the advertising campaign. The more advanced systems can even keep track of sales made from certain ads. This helps the webmaster see what ads are actually making money for the business. Another feature of many ad tracking programs is they allow a webmaster to see unique hits. A unique hit is a visit from a first time customer. Unique hits are recognized by the IP address, which is basically the computer ID. Knowing unique hits is important. It is unique hits that will produce new business. It can help for a webmaster to see how many new customers they are getting and from what ads they are getting them. While repeat customers are going to be the backbone of the sales, without new customers the business will never grow. Having the ability to track and monitor unique hits can help a webmaster ensure their business is growing.

Most of the information gathered through an ad tracking program can be displayed in a statistic list. These programs will have easy to read and understand lists that show all the information that has been collected. A

webmaster does not have to sift through information to try to figure out what is going on. They simply pull up that statistics and monitor their advertising efforts.

The combination of ad tracking and using good locations will mean more website traffic and more business. A webmaster that makes use of ad tracking software will be able to save time and money. The efforts put into advertising will yield results, which is what the webmaster is wanting.

Advertising and ad tracking software are pretty important to an online business. The next section will cover another important aspect of online business, membership management. Membership management is the process of keeping track of customer **information** and is very important to today's interactive websites.

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## **Membership management system**

Interaction online is an essential part of the **internet** as we know it today. In the beginning, the internet was a very lonely place. Websites were not linked together, there were no online communities and there was very little interaction between webmasters and visitors, except the common email links. The websites were also very dull. Nothing like today's exciting and interactive websites. Websites today features message boards, chats, lively graphics, colorful text and even music. The internet today is very much a community and people expect websites to be exciting to visit and a place where they will feel at home, not alone.

## **The key to an interactive website**

A big key to website interactivity is providing something useful to the customer. First of all the website itself should be easy to navigate and understand. People tend to go elsewhere if they can not get to what they want quickly. Secondly, the website should provide something to the visitor. Most often this is in the form of information, but it can also be freebies, like free wallpaper downloads, games or a free gift. People really enjoy a website that makes them glad they visited it and when they leave they are more likely to come back if they got something from the website.

## **Benefits of an interactive website**

By providing an interactive and useful website a webmaster is setting the business up for many benefits. Customer retention and enhanced marketing abilities are two of the major benefits of an interactive website. An interactive website needs to have some form of communication between the visitors and the webmaster, for example, a message board. Many interactive websites also allow users to customize the site themselves. An example of this is a shopping cart feature which allows a user to register and put items in their shopping cart that can be stored there until they are ready to purchase them. The website should also have an area where visitors can rate products or offer feedback on the business. All of these things goes to building customer retention and enhanced marketing abilities.

Customer retention is aided by interactive websites because they allow visitors to make the website feel like they belong there and they are welcome there. Customization and community features like message boards keep people coming back. They make the website a place people want to visit and allow visitors to get to know each other. Additionally, once visitors start talking amongst themselves it helps to build up the product or brand. It can make customers more loyal and make them more likely to do business with the company in the future.

Enhanced marketing abilities from an interactive website include using some of the features like the message board and rating systems. The message board is a great area for word of mouth advertising. Visitors are able to share their experiences and be honest about what they liked and didn't like about their purchases. Rating systems give visitors an immediate glimpse into the products and how customers feel about them. These types of things are invaluable. People are more likely to trust what others say then to simply listen to what an advertisement from the company says.

Above all else, interactive websites make a person feel like the business really cares about them. They do not feel isolated or like just another customer among many. Interactive websites can make a customer feel more loyal and build more trust with the business. Having interaction between the customer and the business helps to get rid of the isolated feel of online business. It helps create the

feeling a person gets with a traditional business, of being served, like they matter to the business. In the end an interactive website means more customers and more profit.

### **New challenge - managing information**

With an interactive website comes an additional issue for the webmaster. The webmaster now has to keep track of the visitors registered at the website. With using the interactive tools each visitor registers. Registering can be simple, just gathering the user name, password and email address or it can be more complex and require users to input their name and address in addition to the user name, password and email. That means the webmaster now has a user name and password for each customer and any other information gathered in the registration process about customers. To help simplify the webmaster's job there is something called a member management system.

The member management system is an automated program that keeps track of all the user information. It keeps it organized and ready all the time. If the webmaster or a visitor should need the information they can simply access the system and retrieve it. The webmaster will have a back office area where they have access to every visitor's information. Each visitor can retrieve their information from the system usually by inputting their email address and waiting for an email containing the information they have requested. This type of system can be very helpful to the webmaster, freeing up time that would have been spent managing and organizing the user information.

In addition to saving time and helping both the visitor and the webmaster, member management systems also provide security. The information is kept secure preventing someone from getting a hold of visitor's sensitive and private information. These systems come with built-in security that means only the webmaster has back office access and that an authorized person cannot get to a user's information without their permission.

Member management systems are fully automated, too. As mentioned, when a visitor needs access to their information they usually fill in a form or simply enter their email address. The system matches the form data to the visitor's registration data and sends an automatic email with the requested information to their email. Unlike in the past without member management systems, the webmaster never needs to get involved, except in rare cases when a visitor cannot retrieve their information via automated means, which is usually a forgotten email address or password. In cases such as these, a visitor may forget what email address they used to sign up. The automated system cannot match the visitor to the appropriate information and so the webmaster has to go into the system and retrieve it manually. This should not happen often and really is only a small amount of work compared to everything else the system will handle for the webmaster.

## **Digital download protection**

Many webmasters are taking advantage of the benefits of adding digital downloads to their website. Digital downloads can be music, games or other information, like ebooks, that are downloaded from the website to the visitors computer. Digital downloads help to free up space on the website and allow the user to keep the information handy on their own computer to use whenever they desire. Many products are also sold in the digital download format. This cuts down on printing and manufacturing costs, as well as shipping costs for the business and provides immediate access to the product for the consumer. There are some concerns and issues with digital downloads that webmasters need to be aware of before adding one to their website.

### **Setting up payment for digital downloads**

One of the biggest issues with digital downloads is how to charge for them. There are basically two ways to charge for a digital download. The visitor can be charged per copy or pay for a license. Per copy means the user pays for a single copy and use of the product. A license gives the user rights to the product to use for an indefinite period of time. Per copy rates are usually cheaper while license rates are usually more expensive. Per copy is good to use for music where the person is buying just the right to listen to the music with the copyright still protected. A license is good for a game, where the user will be using it for a long period of time. Both can be used in any situation, but for each product there is a way to charge that has become almost standard online, so customers expect to pay that way no matter where they go. It is a good idea for a webmaster to check into how other companies are charging for similar products so they can stick to the standard.

Additionally, a webmaster can also offer pay per download or subscription services. Pay per download is best if the website offers limited digital downloads where subscription services are good for a website that offers many downloads that a customer will want to download often.

Typically, music is sold under a subscription service because people are going to be buying a lot of it. By charging for a subscription the customer is going to save money verses buying it per copy. Usually, though, websites will still offer per copy purchases to those customers who choose not to get a subscription. This is an example that helps define the subscription verses per copy sales.

### **Security concerns with digital downloads**

As mentioned there are many concerns a webmaster will have to address before putting digital downloads on their website. Piracy, which is the illegal downloading or stealing of a digital download is one of the biggest issues with digital downloads. If the download is not protected, it is possible for visitors to download it without having to pay for it. Unauthorized access to a digital download opens the door for piracy.

When setting up a digital download a webmaster must ensure that they take every precaution against unauthorized access. They have to set up safeguards and other security features to keep unauthorized users out. Hackers and those that are skilled with programming may be able to easily bypass simple systems. If possible, a webmaster should use a digital download software program to set up their download or set up their download on another website where they can ensure it is secure. There are many different programs a webmaster can download to give protection to the websites digital downloads. Many online banks offer some form of digital download protection program. These programs are nice because they are already set up and ready to go. All a webmaster has to do is install it into the website.

There are additional things a webmaster needs to do to protect their websites digital downloads. They need to check with their web host service and see if they offer password protection for digital download directories. A password helps keep them locked from unauthorized access. It is also important to make sure the directories are not easily accessed by including an index.htm file. The download pages should also not be linked to other pages of the website. By not linking the page is more secure and isolated from hackers. The downloads also need to be inaccessible from a search engine. The pages need to not come up in searches. To prevent this a webmaster should give them uncommon file names, like using a string of numbers. They should also provide them as a .zip file since search engines do not usually bother with .zip files when doing searches. A search engine will index the download page if the tag does not include the 'no follow' command. If a search engine gets a hold of a directory file then unauthorized access is likely to occur.

### **Delivery of digital downloads**

There are a few different ways a webmaster can deliver their digital download to the customer. The delivery method is often dependent upon many factors, from the bandwidth of the website to the size of the file to the number of downloads. The three most common methods of download delivery are unique links, download offsite and email attachment. Unique links are where the download page is set up to a link that is only for a one time use and for that particular customer. The link is usually delivered via email after the customer as made their purchase. Using a unique link can provide additional security since links can be deleted easily. However, they do require a little more work on the webmasters part to set them up and ensure they are working properly. This can be a hassle for a webmaster who is having many downloads per day.

Downloading digital downloads directly off the website is, perhaps, the most common delivery method. This method is easy to set up, but requires the website have enough space to handle the file. It can also put strain on the server load, depending on how many downloads are being conducted at a time. For the webmaster it is simply a matter of attaching the file to the website and setting up the download option. The customer will only need to push a download link and the digital download is then downloaded to their computer.

Email attachments are where the digital download file is sent as an email attachment to the customer. These are easy to set up and easy for the customer. The biggest issue with this method, though, is that some files may be rather large and email limits may prevent it from going through to the customer. Additionally, many people are weary of email attachments as they are known to harbor viruses and other malicious items that when opened can infect a computer.

### **How to use digital downloads**

Digital downloads are great for a business that sells information. Books, classes or music can all be sold through digital downloads. Anything that is intangible can be sold through a digital download. By selling products this way a business is making their product available to the customer immediately. They are also eliminating shipping costs, which are a huge downfall of online business. Digital downloads are a great business tool online. They can provide immediate product access and help save money. They are an automation tool that really provides a good benefit to both the customer and the business. With digital downloads a webmaster can sell products or simply make their website more appealing.

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## Conclusion

Website automation has been very effective in helping webmasters change their websites from boring to customer attractions. The benefits of website automation can not be ignored. The many aspects and tools involved make a website a place customers want to visit and a place they like to come back to often. Website automation can mean the difference between big sales and mediocre business.

Online businesses face the unique challenge of trying to interact with customers. In a traditional business setting the interaction is immediate. The customer and owner meet face to face and they can conduct business one on one. Having this face to face interaction is something that helps build the relationship and create sales, customer loyalty and repeat business. Online business does not offer that face to face interaction so it is up to the webmaster to make up for that. An automated website is interactive and creates a much needed connection between the customer and the business. Automated websites give some control to the customer, allowing them to interact with other website visitors, send messages to the webmaster, buy products and even customize their experience. All of these things help to bridge the gap between customer and online business. The automated tools, like autoresponders and customer service programs help to make the online shopping experience more personalized for customers. They can make the customer feel as if the business owner really cares about them and that their business is important, just as if they had that face to face interaction. Website automation can take an online business to a new level of customer appreciation and satisfaction.

Website automation also can give sales a boost through the use of tools like ad tracking systems. These automation tools help ensure that advertising is on track and that the target market is being reached. They can help save time and money, too. Affiliate programs are another tool that can build up the business name recognition and boost sales, as well. These programs are easy to implement and can help to secure some of the most loyal customers. These tools are invaluable to an online business.

Let's review the website automation tools that can help make a website better.

### **Autoresponders and Mailing List Systems**

Autoresponders and mailing list systems help to provide communication between the customer and business. These tools can keep customers informed and connected to the business. With proper use these tools can help to build a good, solid relationship that equals repeat business. The biggest issue with these tools is spam. It is very important for a business to safeguard against allegations of spam, which could result in huge fines and loss of sales.

Autoresponders and mailing lists will send automated messages to a list of customers as desired by the webmaster. The autoresponders can handle many customer requests and do so in far less time than it would take for the webmaster to do. These tools make keeping in contact with customers easy and help ensure that valuable time is reserved for handling issues that need immediate attention.

### **Affiliate Program Managers**

Affiliate programs have proven themselves over time to be a great business tool. Even large businesses have used affiliates to boost sales. Affiliate programs offer many benefits, and it is very smart for a webmaster to set up their program through an affiliate program manager. Doing this will make the program more successful and less time consuming. Adding an affiliate program to a website has the most benefit of increasing advertising effort because each affiliate is advertising the business

and making sales. An affiliate program is like having free advertising and a large sales staff without all the extra costs.

The affiliate program, once set up, will run on its own. The affiliates will be advertising and selling. The system will log the sales and calculate the commissions. All the webmaster has to do is send out payments and make sure everyone's performance is going well. They can focus on making sure that the affiliate program is really working to their advantage instead of worrying about administrative tasks.

### **Customer Support Systems**

Online business has always had to struggle with keeping that personal touch. Customer service is crucial to online business. Customers who feel disconnected to the business will not likely form any feelings of loyalty. They will be less likely to become a repeat customer, as well. Having a strong customer support system is key to keeping customers coming back.

### **Really Simple Syndication (RSS)**

Really Simple Syndication has changed the way users use the web. RSS feeds have made staying current with websites easy and fast. Users used to have to bookmark a website and return to it for updates or sign up for email lists to be able to get up to date information about it. Many times users would forget to visit the website again often or the emails would get lost in filters or simply disregarded. RSS feeds have provided a way for users to stay connected with little effort and little time spent doing it. They simply subscribe to a feed and get the info right when they want it. They can stay current without ever having to try to remember a website address or reading through countless emails.

### **Ad Tracking Systems**

Ad tracking systems are an invaluable tool. Advertising online is not an easy task. It takes skill and plenty of hard work. Ad tracking systems help make the task easier. They allow a webmaster to monitor and track the progress of their advertising efforts. Ad tracking systems provide an easy way for a webmaster to figure out what works and what does not.

Ad tracking systems keep information updated and in an easy to use format. The webmaster can simply check in on the statistics as needed to monitor their advertising efforts. This is much better than old methods where the webmaster had to handle tracking manually. Manual tracking involved having customers enter the ad code, which could not always be counted on. Then the webmaster had to organize the information and try to see what ad codes were doing the best and what ones weren't. It was not an ideal situation. Ad tracking systems have taken all the hassle away and made keeping tabs on advertising quite simple.

### **Membership Management System**

With interactive websites being almost mandatory for online business success, membership management systems are crucial. Interactive features require visitors to register and have a password and username. Someone has to be responsible for keeping track of this information. Without an automation tool like a member management system it is the job of the webmaster.

The webmaster has to create a database with all of the information entered by visitors. They have to create a file for each visitor and handle any requests for lost passwords, user names or any other problems they may have. When a user requests information the webmaster has to go through there

database and find it. Then they have to verify the information to ensure the visitor is really who they say they are to ensure safety. Finally they can send the requested information to the visitor. This is very complex and time consuming.

Membership management systems take all of the leg work away. They automatically log each visitor's information and keep it on file. If a visitor requests information the system quickly finds it, verifies it and sends it to the visitor in a matter of minutes. Besides saving the webmaster time, the membership management system also makes things much less hassle for the visitors.

### **Digital Download Protection**

Digital downloads are a great tool for a business. If a business sells an intangible product then digital downloads can become the backbone of their sales. If they do not sell intangible products they can still use digital downloads to provide useful information to customers or free gifts that will enhance the customer's experience with the company. Digital downloads can seem complex, but once a business gets them set up they should be able to add to them or change them easily. The set up is well worth the benefits a webmaster will see from having digital downloads as part of their website.

All of these automation tools can work together to create a fully automated website that is user friendly. The experience for the customer will be enhanced and the webmaster will spend far less time trying to manage their website and more time focusing on what is important - selling. There is no risk for anyone because everything is being handled. Customers are still getting the proper attention, but the webmaster has more free time to handle customer's individual needs instead of wasting time worrying about the function of their website. Website automation is definitely something every webmaster should look into. It will take a website to a whole new level. Automated websites make the online shopping experience different and more exciting to the customer. They build sales and, in the end, can help a business prosper in the hard world of internet business.

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