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© E-NEWSLETTERS: Harness the Power of the Internet to Drive Shoppers to Your Store

More retailers are discovering the power of the Internet as a marketing tool. Electronic newsletters, or “E-newsletters,” in particular, have become popular vehicles for cajoling loyal shoppers into opening their wallets wider and handing more dollars over the sales counter.

Bottles & Bridles, a tack shop in Wakefield, N.H., started an E-newsletter six months ago and hasn’t looked back.

“It’s a lot of fun,” said store partner Cathy McCarthy. “And people seem to like it.”

Monique Proulx-Walter, owner of The Equestrian Shop, North Andover, Mass., has started collecting E-mail addresses from customers in anticipation of her own launch of an E-newsletter in about a year.

“We are planning to issue an E-newsletter with lots of little bits of information,” she said. “People seem to like that approach.”

Successful E-newsletters can certainly attract a big following. Consider the example of “E-Chatter,” the E-newsletter from the National Cutting Horse Association. After several years of publication, it now has a circulation of nearly 9,000.

Maybe you’re thinking of starting your own E-newsletter, but you haven’t been convinced that it is worth the effort. What can one do for your store, after all, that other advertising can’t?

Marketing experts point to some major unique benefits. The first is the high value received for time and money invested.

“You can run an E-mail marketing campaign on a shoestring,” said Doug Pond, an electronic marketing specialist who runs a Minneapolis, Minn.-based consultancy named Subject Line Marketing & Design. Despite their low cost, E-newsletters are powerful tools for driving shoppers to your Web site and your store.

An E-newsletter also allows for very

quick turnaround time.

“Electronic newsletter campaigns move much faster than traditional ones,” said Pond. “Seconds after you hit send, you’ll often see subscriber activity: People will be opening your E-mail, then clicking on your links to go to your Web site.”

For this reason, E-newsletters are great vehicles for getting out those last-minute promotions to beef up attendance at a seminar or special sales event.

Electronic newsletters are no substitute for traditional advertising—which is required to raise the profile of your store and attract new customers—but they are invaluable tools for increasing the spending habits of your current customer base.

So, how can you produce an E-newsletter that boosts your bottom line? Here are some dos and don’ts from Internet marketing experts:

1 Make it useful. What goes into your E-newsletter? Anything that will help your recipient live a better life when using your merchandise or services.

When planning content, keep asking yourself this question: How can we serve our customers with good information to build a relationship and keep that relationship at the top of their minds?

“The purpose of electronic newsletters is to keep in touch with your customers so that when you have specials or new products or new services, you can advertise them at little or no cost,” said Ralph F. Wilson, an internet marketing consultant based in Rocklin, Calif. (www.wilsonweb.com). “To do

that, you need to offer good information about the product or service or industry you represent.”

Include information on new services, new lines of merchandise, private sales, smart consumer buying tips and great ways shoppers can use the merchandise you sell.

Bottles & Bridles makes special efforts to inform its readers of resources they may not otherwise hear about. “We recently featured a nonprofit Web site that helps people track down stolen horses,” said McCarthy. “Not everyone is aware that there are some 50,000 horses stolen or missing in the United States every year.”

Bonus tip: Invite recipients to print out the E-newsletter and bring it to your store for a free gift or discount.

2 Keep it short. “People are in a hurry and don’t want to read long newsletters,” said Wilson. “An effective newsletter can be as short as one or two paragraphs of brief tidbits.”

The Bottles & Bridles newsletter is usually just four paragraphs long. “I think as you go along and readers become loyal, then the newsletter can get longer,” said McCarthy. “In the beginning, though, you need to get your readers to open up the E-mail in the first place. A short newsletter encourages them to do so.”

What do you do when you have more information than will fit comfortably in a short form? Include links that take readers to Web sites where they can get all the information they need. This is what McCarthy did with the Web site about stolen horses, for example.

Bonus tip: When in doubt about frequency, start with monthly mailings.