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It's hard to believe that the world's first web site was launched in 1991 and really consisted of nothing more than a single page. It's even harder to imagine that web sites really didn't even start to catch on until several years after that as the personal computer came more into being.

Today, there are millions of web sites worldwide, and the technology continues to evolve at a staggering pace.

With all those sites vying for attention, it's critical that your store's site be kept fresh and exciting. Yes, keeping up with it all takes dedication and hard work, but all that elbow grease can pay off in increased hits to, and sales from, your web site.

While online shopping still cannot allow consumers to touch, feel and test the products they are looking at buying, (that's undoubtedly something somebody will figure out down the road,) it's getting closer in its own virtual way. Features such as spin and zoom allow shoppers to examine their potential purchases up close and from many different angles. Videos allow manufacturers to do live demos of their products, show how they are made or provide testimonials from satisfied customers.

If you're looking to update your site, but you're not exactly sure what you want, there are sites such as www.webawards.com that feature examples where you can easily see what others are doing. This particular site allows users to browse by industry category, including retail.

To view an award-winning site that utilizes just about every bell and whistle you can imagine, log on to www.us.levi.com. The effect they're using on the home page is known as Flash. Click on "Shop Men" or "Shop Women", and then click on one of the models. A page appears that features product specs. When you scroll your cursor over the product photo, a zoom tool allows you to view details of the jeans. To see even more amazing features, explore a promotional part of the Levi's web site at www.us.levi.com/promotions/luv.aspx.

Not all parts of your web site need to be about wowing visitors with visual effects. There are always the "behind the scenes" management features that may not be showy, but are just as integral to your success as an online retailer. Your point-of-purchase and inventory management systems may be in this category if they're connected to your web site.

Surveys of Tack 'n Togs readers over the last several years have revealed that there are less than ten software manufacturers that are regularly used by retailers of products for the horse and rider. In the 2008 survey, respondents named Retail Pro as the number two distributor of these products, second only to QuickBooks. Now, the company is spearheading a new venture that can help retailers market their online products more effectively.

Bizcampaign is a web-based management tool that provides users with some pretty amazing capabilities in the marketing arena. It interfaces with any software, but has a loyalty program perk for current users of Retail Pro, and operates as a companion to that software. Implementation is flexible—the company will provide tools for store owners to do it all themselves, or handle it completely for them. It simply involves logging on to the bizcampaign.com web site to get started.

The company also offers campaign tools in the areas of direct mail marketing, e-mail marketing, telephone tracking, offline ad

tracking and newsletter marketing, to name a few. The beauty of bizcampaign is its capability to track marketing effectiveness and instantly provide reports summarizing how different campaigns are working.

"Anything they're doing from a marketing standpoint, bizcampaign tracks it," said Chad Helms, director of the company. "We are a one-stop shop that gives retailers the tools and the knowledge to know what their money is doing." That knowledge includes who is responding to your campaigns, what prompted the response, where they live and when and how they responded. Reports can be pulled by demographic, too. So if for instance you want to know how many men in Colorado responded to a certain campaign, you have that capability.

Because Retail Pro has been implemented in so many stores in the equine industry, bizcampaign is striving to offer its services to this same group. Currently, it is working with Justin Brands on a holiday campaign geared to Western stores.

If you're fond or even proud of being able to accomplish

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things on your own when it comes to your store's web site, you probably already know that there are many inexpensive software options available at your local computer store to help you along the way. There also are free downloads available online, but as always you need to be careful with some of those products so be sure to do your homework before downloading.

If you operate on a Windows system, one software application that you may wish to consider is Window Movie Maker. Movie Maker has been lauded as "so easy a two year old could use it," so rest assured that the learning curve is not steep. One idea for getting started is to take some digital photographs of your store and use Movie Maker, or a like software, to take potential customers on a "tour" or to introduce them to your staff. Words and music can even be part of your production.

Most importantly when it comes to your store's web site is to make sure it meets your customers' needs. A glitzy, award-winning site can be great to brag about and may get you lots of kudos among the techy crowd, but if your customers find it takes too much of their time to navigate through or is too hard to find things on, then you aren't accomplishing what it is that you want to do online, and that is to build store recognition and sell product.