

ONLINE BUSINESS:

Web removes many obstacles to growth

By Gregory J. Alexander, contributing writer

There's no denying that the Internet has grown to become one of the most influential technological developments in the past century. Whether it's sending e-mail, making travel arrangements, balancing your checkbook online or researching for a college term paper, we use the Internet every day. Of course, the Internet has also had a profound impact on small businesses, allowing a "Mom and Pop" shop to sell merchandise nationwide and globally without having to fly all over marketing and distributing their products. A wisely developed and efficient Web site can take small businesses to places they never imagined.

A perfect example of this is a small, Perry Hall-based business that was developed by a mother of eight – on Mother's Day, no less – who found a solution to a frustrating problem. In 1992, Catherine Chetelat decided to tackle an annoying and embarrassing problem – shorts that would ride up her inner thighs. After several trial-and-error methods failed, she developed the original NoRiders Iron-on Patch, and two years later, her son, Michael began the research and development process. In 1999, ProductMasters was incorporated, and six years later, the company sold its first purchase order.

"We have many different products now, but our main product is still the NoRiders," says Michael Chetelat, president of ProductMasters, who notes that four different NoRiders are sold – iron-on patches for lightweight, iron-on patches for medium and heavyweight fabrics, as well as sew-in and self-adhesive inseam stays. What makes the product especially unique is that it's sold almost exclusively online. "We sell online through our site (www.noriders.com) and through Web sites of our distributors and retailers, including Clotilde, JoAnn Fabrics, Notions Marketing and United Notions," says Chetelat. "When people first hear about the product, they have two reactions. Some have experienced this problem and have been waiting for a solution and say, 'Thank God!' Others doubt its effectiveness, and this is where the Web site comes in. We first developed it to provide legitimacy and to be able to demonstrate how it works through text, graphics and online demonstration videos. The primary goal was proof of concept. We also wanted to stress that this was not an issue for solely plus-size people; we have customers who are young, male athletes, and we can use the videos to reinforce this."

Stacey Certner, CEO of DC Web Designers (www.dcwebdesigners.com), which develops and maintains Web sites for customers in Washington, D.C., northern Virginia and Maryland, as well as for national companies, says that the key to a successful Web site is that it has to work for the business and its clients. "Our slogan is 'smart and good looking,' because while a Web site needs to be attractive and pleasing to look at, it has to be user friendly and work effectively. You don't want a user to just look at your home page and leave; you have to capture them and keep them there," says Certner.

Certner says that it's important to have a Web site with a clear site map and to limit the amount of content. "We have a copywriter on staff who organizes and fine tunes the content. A big mistake companies make is loading too much information on a site, making the site cumbersome to navigate." She adds that another big pitfall companies make is to underestimate the power of the Web. "We deal with clients ranging from a t-shirt company to the World Bank and Harvard University. The budget is always an issue, especially with start-ups, so unless they have a huge budget, we take them through different stages. At first, we may design a basic site and grow it to involve e-commerce. However, so many companies don't allot enough money to keep a site going. We've had

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million-dollar companies who allot only \$5,000 for a Web site. We remind them that developing and maintaining a site takes money, but they'll save money in the long run as they can eliminate printed collateral materials and reduce mailing costs."

Joe Borkowicz, senior vice president of direct banking for Provident Bank, says that whenever a client comes to Provident Bank with a new or updated business plan, he makes sure that if an online component is involved that the company has allotted money for marketing the Web site. "Using a Web site to grow your business is a science, and you need to make sure that people find your Web site, either through a banner ad or by taking advantage of search engine optimization techniques to drive customers to your site," says Borkowicz, who notes that Provident Bank has been developing a Business Resource Center that will include information on how to capitalize on online sales. "A Web site is a huge opportunity for small businesses, but your site needs to be engaging, educational, easy to navigate and visually appealing. You need to ask yourself: What are my customers looking for online?"

What will engage them? What do we want them to do next – request information online, call us or visit us in person?"

Chetelat says that while the initial goal was to explain his product, he always knew e-commerce was going to be part of the plan. "At first, we just sold directly through PayPal, but now we can take credit cards and sell through distributors. We wanted a Web site that we could update ourselves, so we went through a company that offered a 'site builder' where we can manage the site ourselves, making it more affordable. Selling online cuts down on our expenses and once we get a more solid distribution process, we plan to go international." •

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PHOTO: MICHAEL AND CATHERINE CHETELAT



Photo by Jim Burger, contributing photographer

MICHAEL AND CATHERINE CHETELAT RUN PRODUCTMASTERS, MAKERS OF NORIDERS, WHICH ARE IRON-ON PATCHES THAT PREVENT SHORTS FROM – AS THE NAME INDICATES – RIDING UP.