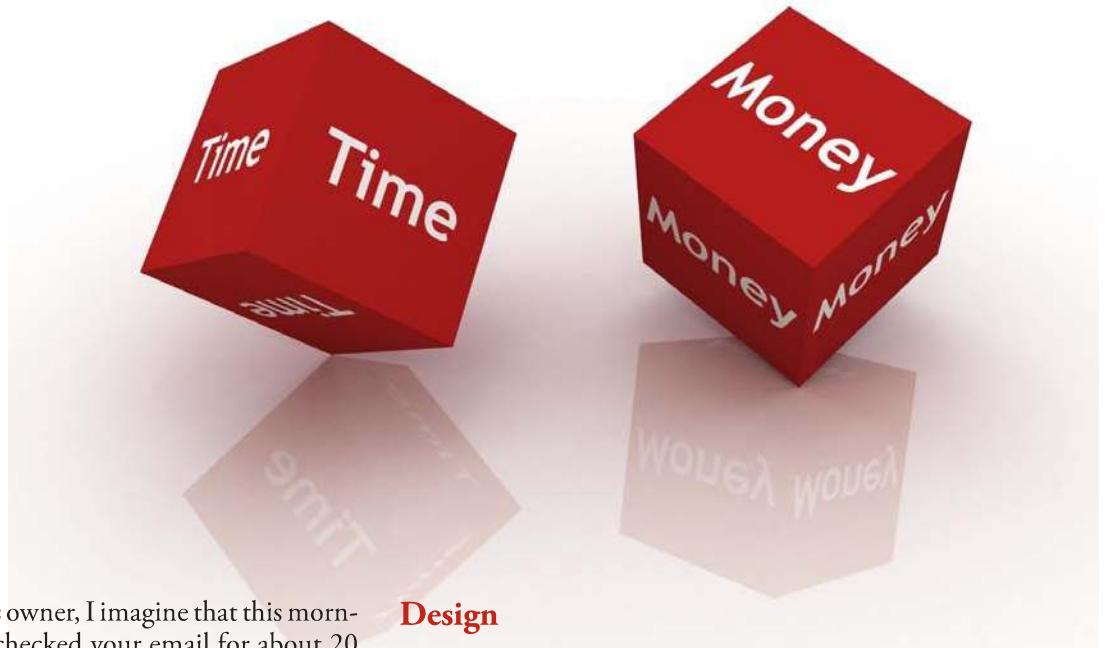


Outsourcing: *Hiring Out to Save Time and Money*

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As an online business owner, I imagine that this morning you woke up, checked your email for about 20 minutes, approved several actions by your vendor partners, then walked out to the beach and sunbathed for the rest of the day. No? But wasn't that the dream?

Okay, most of us now realize that this may never happen to that extreme. In reality you probably woke up, spent 2 hours on emails, 5 hours packing and shipping orders, 3 hours working on your site, and 4 hours doing paperwork, with a photo of the beach on your desk. But it doesn't have to be that way. There are companies that can do literally everything that you do – you can choose to outsource tasks you don't like, that are too time consuming or you just aren't very good at.

As an e-commerce consultant, my advice has always been to “do what you do best, and hire out the rest.” I equate it to brick and mortar businesses. If you open a shoe store, you're probably an expert in shoes, not building display stands. So, you hire someone to build your store, build your signs, install your carpet, plumb in your bathroom, and paint your walls so you can concentrate on finding the best shoe suppliers, negotiating deals, ordering inventory, etc. Once it's all set up and you're selling shoes, you probably have a lawyer, accountant, one or more stock people, sales people and a cleaning crew. A Web business is not much different, except it's easier to spend all your time on activities that feel important, but should be outsourced.

Design

The first and most obvious function to outsource is building your website. You can learn how to do it yourself and save some money, but that requires considerable time learning an entire profession – like learning plumbing to install your store's toilet. Mistakes in design harm search engine positioning, usability, cross-browser errors, as well as complete crashes down the line when you no longer have time to deal with it.

Hiring a designer up front brings you a vendor who can not only take care of early challenges, but also fix inevitable future problems very quickly since they know the site inside and out. To find help, look for companies that have done sites within your industry, check references and find out if their clients are making money. Remember, a pretty site does not mean a successful site. What matters is a usable site, so look for designers experienced in helping their client convert sales.

Usability

After you have a site, you should keep improving and upgrading. You may learn your main competitor just added gift certificates, and you want to offer them too. Should you figure it out yourself, or hire an expert? Odds are it's more efficient to hire someone than for you to spend the hours of investigation and learning you'll need to do it yourself.

Whatever e-commerce platform you choose, there are expert consultants available to help. The greatest benefit of these consultants is they spend every day within their niche, and often can make recommendations that you hadn't even known were available. For example, Miva Merchant has over 2,000 third party modules available to add functionality for as little as \$20 – but it's difficult to know which one is the best option without experienced help.

The Small Stuff

If you find yourself constantly performing data entry, you might consider hiring someone for this, even part time. Many online companies have failed by wasting time on the “small things.” Should a business owner really be spending hours each day typing in data? Ask yourself, are you doing it yourself because you have to, or because it makes you feel like you're doing something productive?

As orders come in, you'll find organization can be difficult. Order information in your shopping cart system, QuickBooks for bookkeeping, a UPS computer for shipping, an email system for customer communications, dealing with returns – this can all be time consuming and overwhelming. Sooner rather than later, you should look for order management systems to help. Some systems, like Stone Edge Order Manager (www.stoneedge.com), do just about everything. However, wouldn't it be wonderful to not deal with any of this? Yes, you can outsource all of

it with order fulfillment and customer service vendors.

After reaching a dozen orders or more per day, you're probably cluttering up your kitchen table, frustrating your spouse, and wondering why you did this in the first place. This is an excellent time to look for fulfillment companies to help. They range from small quantity specialists to large companies that can process hundreds of orders a day. When searching, look for a company already set up to work with your order system/shopping cart.

Customer Service, Search and Advertising

It is probable that when your phone rings, you're answering the same customer questions over and over. There are many companies that specialize in customer service functions, from answering questions, taking orders, and processing returns. Some will even respond to your online chat system, if you have one. Also be sure to have a deep FAQ section on your website.



Search engine optimization (SEO) is a tough one. You need a professional to get serious results, as the rules change almost daily, but there are so many SEO scammers it's easy to get ripped off. If you choose to do this, be sure to contact their clients for references, research for comments about them on Google, and never sign a long-term contract. Watch for the word “guaranteed,” since nothing can be guaranteed in the search engine arena. Another way to find a company is to find online stores that are getting great results and ask them if they've hired a company they're happy with.

Beyond SEO, there's pay-per-click (PPC) advertising. This is a proven way to get large numbers of qualified site visitors, but also an area where you burn thousands of dollars and still not get good results. Google has a certification/training program, so a good start is to search for a certified “Google Advertising Professional.”

As you can see, the best way to find vendors for outsourcing is to ask around. Online store owners are usually happy to share and recommend, often actively promoting their vendors. When you're checking references, ask each reference if they know of someone else who also uses the vendor, so you can talk with clients the vendor may be shielding from view. Do the research up front, and your experience will be much happier. Then, after you've outsourced everything but what you love, you can spend more time at the beach, living the dream. ■



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