E-Marketing

By N. David Milder

HOW EDOS CAN HELP INDEPENDENT DOWNTOWN MERCHANTS ENGAGE EFFECTIVELY IN E-MARKETING

EDOs can facilitate effective small merchant online activities by helping them understand and use a simple analytical process. This process begins by looking at and prioritizing the organization's marketing objectives. It then matches the objectives with the e-marketing tools (e.g., website, emails, Twitter, Facebook, blog, etc.) that can best achieve each of those objectives. Finally, it selects those objective-matching tools that can be implemented, because the organization has the required resources. A primary objective for most small merchants should be "to be found" on the Internet. Another is cultivating repeat customers. Many small merchants can be effective online without having an e-store or the elaborate use of other e-commerce tools.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past year, DANTH Inc., a consulting firm specializing in downtown revitalization, has experimented with such social media as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Pinterest and revamped our website, blog and email program. To support this effort, we did a lot of research on what the various e-marketing tools do best and the challenges small firms like ours have in using them. This article shares with the downtown revitalization community what we learned from our e-marketing overhaul, so that a) more independent downtown merchants might make an effective transition to e-commerce and b) to help downtown organizations and other EDOs create effective programs to assist them.

As a firm, we learned the importance of an analytical process able to identify the e-marketing tools that will most effectively use an organization's scarce resources to achieve critical marketing objectives. This process:

- Begins by looking at and prioritizing the organization's marketing objectives;
- Then matches the objectives with the e-marketing tools (e.g., website, emails, Twitter, Facebook, blog, etc.) that can best achieve each of those objectives; and
- Selects those objective-matching tools that can be implemented, because the organization has the required financial resources and either has or can acquire the needed skilled employees.

Understanding this process and then helping the merchants successfully go through it is the key

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to success for downtown organizations and other EDOs that want to help independent merchants establish a strong and viable e-commerce presence.

WHERE NOT TO START

Downtown merchants and the staffs of their downtown organizations are likely to encounter a slew of e-marketing consultants who suggest one e-marketing tool or another because of the following:

- These e-marketing tools are popular;
- They are considered chic;
- The astonishingly rapid growth of users on Facebook and Twitter; and
- Most importantly, the social media's purported and vaguely evidenced ability to attract new customers and drive sales.

Such "follow the pack" reasoning is plainly inadequate. Many independent downtown merchants are small establishments, with fewer than five employees. They have limited financial resources available for their e-marketing activities. Most of such a firm's e-marketing activities will fall directly into the lap of the owner, where they compete with many other demands for his/her time and attention. As a result, it is essential to know that the use of an e-marketing tool will be:

- Consistent with the firm's overall marketing strategy;

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Field observations strongly suggest that one of the biggest mistakes independent downtown merchants make is the failure to first identify the specific marketing objectives they want their e-commerce activities to achieve. It is essential for them to do so, if they want to effectively use e-marketing tools.

- Effective at reaching strategic objectives; and
- Affordable in terms of money, the owner's time, and the skill sets of the firm's current employees as well as any other skilled professionals it can afford to hire.

POSSIBLE DOWNTOWN MERCHANT E-MARKETING OBJECTIVES

Field observations strongly suggest that one of the biggest mistakes independent downtown merchants make is the failure to first identify the specific marketing objectives they want their e-commerce activities to achieve. It is essential for them to do so, if they want to effectively use e-marketing tools. Typically faced with a scarcity of money, skills, and time, a small operator: a) needs to have objectives in order to make any judgment about the effectiveness of the e-marketing tools the firm invests in, and b) cannot hope to achieve all of the possible objectives. Therefore, prioritizing them and then focusing on the most important are essential.

There is a wide range of marketing objectives that a small merchant can try to realize through the use of the right e-marketing tools. Here is a brief list of some potential e-marketing objectives:

- Reaching target market segments
- Being found on the Internet
- Finding new customers
- Branding
- Making direct sales: setting up an e-storefront
- Advertising: information about new merchandise, sales, discounts, fun events; driving customers to brick and mortar stores
- Relationship building with customers; grooming "store apostles"
- Customer service.

When considering e-marketing, for the small independent downtown merchant, the most important of these objectives, the one that all should focus on, is "being found on the Internet." Here's why. The most significant impact the Internet has had on retailing is that, today, most shoppers first go online to research the merchandise or service they are interested in and the stores that sell them. For example, a 2010 Pew survey found that "58 percent of Americans research online about the products and services they buy," with 78 percent of Internet users engaging in this online researching (1). Merchants who are not in on the search, consequently, are unlikely to be in on the sale!" Being found" is complex and entails several components, such as:

- Name recognition – shoppers can learn who you are,
- Contact info – shoppers can learn where you are,
- Info about merchandise offered – shoppers can find what they want to buy, and
- "Why this store" info – reasons why the shopper should buy what he/she is looking for in this shop.

Merchants in different situations may vary in their needs for each of these components. For example, a new downtown merchant or a pure Internet retailer needs to be concerned about all four components, but a longtime downtown merchant may already be fairly well-known and found with relative ease. If the number of downtown merchants and the trade area population are small and/or relatively stagnant, then more merchants are likely to be in this situation. As a result, in many small and medium-sized downtowns, shoppers are probably more likely to want to know which merchants are offering the goods and services they want to buy and the reasons to make that purchase in that store.

The websites of too many downtown merchants and downtown organizations that provide member merchants with a web page usually just focus on the shop's name and contact information. Actually, the merchants usually have the stronger additional needs to display their product information and make persuasive appeals to patronize their shops.

Regarding online sales, although they accounted for an estimated 5 percent of the USA's 2012 total retail sales, a study in 2009 by Mckinsey & Company estimated that by 2011 the Internet will have played a role in 45 percent of the nation's retail sales (2). So the vast majority, around 89 percent, of the Internet's impact on retail is not via direct sales (Figure 1). E-marketing's impact is primarily indirect, but still critical. Also, many observers have noted that e-retail stores demand a lot of complex and expensive infrastructure related to storage, shipping, and payments. While this barrier has kept more firms from competing with Amazon, it also is a major reason that more independent downtown merchants have not attempted e-stores and why so many that did have failed.

FIGURE 1. CURRENT IMPACT OF E-COMMERCE ON RETAILING

- In 2012, online sales only accounted for about 5 percent of total retail sales
- In 2011, the Internet played a role in an estimated 45 percent of the nation's retail sales
- About 89 percent of the Internet's impact on retailing is indirect, not through online purchases

SOME EXAMPLES OF MATCHING E-MARKETING OBJECTIVES TO APPROPRIATE E-MARKETING TOOLS

Research on e-marketing tools is still unfolding, with many issues yet unanswered, but this much is clear: e-marketing tools differ in their ability to achieve various marketing objectives. It is critical to select those e-tools that are best able to achieve your firm's objectives. For example:

- The social media differ substantially in their penetration of the online audience: according to a 2012 Pew report, 66 percent of online adults use Facebook, 20 percent use LinkedIn, 16 percent use Twitter and 12 percent use Pinterest (3). (See Figure 2.)

FIGURE 2. USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG ONLINE USERS

Percent	Social Media
66%	Facebook
20%	LinkedIn
16%	Twitter
12%	Pinterest
12%	Instagram
5%	Tumblr

Source: Pew survey, August 2012, 1,005 respondents

- The social media will also differ in their ability to penetrate specific market segments. Some illustrative findings by Pew: "African-Americans, young adults, and mobile users stand out for their high rates of Twitter usage" (4); 19 percent of online women use Pinterest compared to 5 percent of online males (5); LinkedIn attracts the most educated and male audience (6).

- E-commerce tools also vary in their ability to enable a downtown merchant to be found in Internet customer research efforts. (See Figure 3.) The Pew Research Center studied the sources that people rely on to get news and information about local restaurants, bars, and clubs. They found that 38 percent used a search engine and 17 percent specialty websites (e.g., zagat.com, urbanspoon.com, tripadvisor.com, etc.), while only 3 percent relied on a social networking site or Twitter. For finding information about other local businesses, Pew's survey had similar findings: 36 percent of respondents relied on a search engine, 16 percent on specialty websites, and just 1 percent on a social media (7).

- The most searched for online categories, when shoppers seek information about local businesses, are restaurants, financial services, and beauty services (8). Firms in these sectors definitely need an easily findable online presence.

- Research also suggests that social media do not drive online sales. For example, one study found that the average order value of e-commerce sales sourced

from social media is 25 percent lower than the average sale coming from emails and 35 percent lower than those sourced from Internet search. (9). Another study in 2012 by Forrester Research found that only about 1 percent of e-retail transactions could be traced back to "trackable" social media links.

- Consumers making a first-time purchase with an e-retailer were far more likely to originate their purchase by first making a direct visit to the vendor site (20 percent), or finding it via "organic search results," i.e., the web page listings generated because they are closest to the search terms or "paid search," i.e., listings that businesses pay for so their web pages will be listed with certain keywords (16 percent and 11 percent, respectively). For repeat shoppers, e-mails and direct site visits are the keys: 30 percent of their online purchases are sparked by an e-mail from the retailer, while another 30 percent of repeat customer searches start with a direct visit to the retailer's site (10).

- For downtown retailers, the more important question is can e-marketing tools drive customers into their brick and mortar shops and increase sales. We could not find a reliable systematic survey of consumers that addressed this question. However, we did come across numerous anecdotal reports of special product and discount offers distributed via emails, Facebook, and Twitter that did bring more customer traffic and sales into traditional retail shops and eateries. For example, one ice cream parlor we visited in a New York City neighborhood reported occasionally offering special flavors only to people visiting their Facebook page, and they are always quickly sold out. But, this ice cream parlor has been around for about 50 years and has 8,000 Facebook likes.

- Many e-marketing experts claim that e-marketing tools, especially the social media, are very effective at building customer traffic and sales indirectly through stronger branding, relationship building, and better

FIGURE 3. THE SOURCES THAT PEOPLE RELY ON TO GET NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT LOCAL RESTAURANTS AND BUSINESSES

Information Sources	Restaurants, bars, clubs	Local Businesses
Internet	51%	47%
Search engine	38%	36%
Other specialty websites	17%	16%
Social Networking, Twitter	3%	1%
Newspapers	31%	30%
Word of mouth	23%	22%
Local TV	8%	8%
Local radio	3%	5%
Printed newsletter	3%	4%
Mobile phone	2%	1%

Source: Pew survey, January 2011, 2,001 respondents

customer service. For example, a 2012 survey of business to consumer marketers by Webmarketing 123 found that the top objectives of their digital marketing programs were increase brand awareness 33 percent, increase sales 26 percent, generate leads 22 percent, generate site traffic 11 percent, build online community 6 percent, and other 3 percent (11).

- It is interesting that only about a quarter of these marketing professionals were focusing on directly increasing sales. Among these marketers, 49 percent reported search engine optimization had the biggest impact on lead generation compared to 26 percent reporting it was pay-per-click advertising and 25 percent the social media.

WHAT ABOUT THE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICE OPERATIONS?

Personal and professional service firms are very strong in many downtowns. Based on experiences as well as field observations and interviews, the expectation is that most of the previous section applies to these firms too, though there may be some important differences. For example, the potential for effectively using the social media is greater among hair and nail salons, gyms, spas, etc., because they do not primarily sell merchandise and personal relationships are so important in the delivery of their services. Also, LinkedIn will be very important for professional service firms that want to identify and cultivate new client prospects.

SELECTING THE OBJECTIVE-MATCHING TOOLS THAT CAN BE IMPLEMENTED, BECAUSE THE ORGANIZATION HAS OR CAN HIRE THE REQUIRED RESOURCES

The types of resources required to use a particular e-marketing tool will vary by the package of objectives it is targeted to achieve and the amount and complexity of the usages that are required to achieve them. In my field observations, this is the second area where small merchants are likely to encounter problems – or have them made by consultants who just focus on the mechanics of using the e-marketing tools with which they are enthralled.

Given that "being found" online is probably the e-marketing objective most independent downtown merchants should focus on first, the initial inclination of these merchants – or their formal or informal "consultants" – might be to create a complex website with:

- Many pages,
- A full catalog of its merchandise,
- A matching e-store purchasing capability, and
- Lots of short marketing movies to liven up the website.

However, many small firms plainly lack the resources for such a robust effort and, more importantly, they probably do not need it to accomplish their e-marketing objectives. Following are three brief case studies to demonstrate this point.

The High Effort E-Store for a Fast Food Shop. Last year, in a NYC neighborhood that had sustained impressive economic growth through the Great Recession, I interviewed a fast food operator in the 6-10 employees category, who was very interested in penetrating the rapidly growing nearby office worker and high-rise residential markets. Though both market segments were strongly represented within a five-minute walk of the eatery, neither accounted for many of the pedestrians passing by or entering its doors. The owner was interested in creating a website where office workers and residents could find and learn about the eatery and its menu, order from the menu and daily specials, have their orders charged to their credit cards, and have their food delivered to their workplaces or homes.

As this small merchant became aware of the intricacy and full costs of such an operation, he began to question its efficacy. He was expecting to pay consultants to set-up his website, merchandise basket, and credit card charging. However, he did not foresee that he would also need:

- Someone to update the "specials" daily on the website and to periodically keep the overall menu up to date. Updating and maintaining a website can easily eat up far more resources than creating it;
- Additional part-time employees to process the lunch-time orders;
- Additional part-time employees to deliver the ordered food;
- Someone to provide the copy for his website pages;
- Someone to provide the photos and other graphics for the website pages; and
- To spend a lot more of his time and money putting together the needed new team and then managing a complex new operation.

A year later, this small operator has no website but has affiliated with a telephone-based service that takes orders and delivers food if customers know about the delivery service and call it. The eatery also does have a simple "name, rank and serial number" page on its BID's website, a Facebook page with one like and no postings, and is listed on a few special websites such as Foursquare. Right now, not much info is to be found on the web about this eatery. It still needs a much stronger "being found" on the web capability.

This could be accomplished by a modest website, without the e-store. It would successfully provide name and contact information as well as information about the

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Website visitors, for example, could see the full menu and be invited to visit or phone the eatery to learn about and order the daily specials. An even simpler solution would be a substantial improvement of the information provided on the eatery's BID web site page, combined with a campaign to get it listed on more special web pages.

menu and reasons to patronize this eatery. Such a website would provide an affordable and acceptably better, if not optimal, penetration of the office worker market. Website visitors, for example, could see the full menu and be invited to visit or phone the eatery to learn about and order the daily specials. An even simpler solution would be a substantial improvement of the information provided on the eatery's BID web site page, combined with a campaign to get it listed on more special web pages.

The prime take aways from this case study are that:

• Small merchants should be wary of complex uses of e-marketing tools that are beyond their resources;

• More modest deployments of these tools are often more viable and ultimately more effective; and

• BID/SID web pages can be very useful for a small merchant if they do more than just provide the store's name, contact information, and business category. They need to also provide space for information about the shop's merchandise and to tell the merchant's story. This is the prime way that BIDs can help their merchant members gain a viable e-commerce presence.
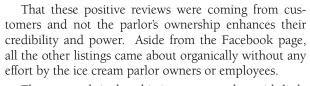
The Low Effort Ice Cream Parlor. The very popular ice cream parlor in a New York City neighborhood mentioned earlier is a unique and highly regarded operation. It has been around for over 50 years and, for decades before that, it was an ice cream parlor under a different owner and name. Today, it is "a functioning antique," with an old soda fountain, tin ceiling, and marble small tile floor. It makes its own ice cream and is famous for its fresh homemade whipped cream.

When I spoke to the owner about his e-marketing activities, he smiled, reporting that he knew nothing about such things, but his workers, most of whom are high school or college students, had created a Facebook page that gathered 8,000+ likes. He felt Facebook definitely had helped generate some additional sales. The shop occasionally offers special flavors only to its Facebook page visitors, with the young workers doing the postings, and they are always quickly sold out. The owner said, with another smile and shrug of his shoulders, that he would like to do more with Facebook, but…. My guess is that the shop was doing well enough that there was no great need now to do more online marketing.

Googling the shop's name showed that this ice cream parlor had a lot more going for it than just its Facebook page. The search showed that its authentic, old time story

and favorable customer reviews and contact information were available on a whole slew of specialty web sites such as:

• google.com,
• plus.google.com,
• www.yelp.com,
• www.facebook.com,
• patch.com,
• newyork.seriouseats.com,
• www.zagat.com,
• www.urbanspoon.com,
• newyork.citysearch.com,
• untappedcities.com,
• www.tripadvisor.com,
• www.delivery.com,
• www.menupages.com,
• www.bridgeandtunnelclub.com,
• events.nydailynews.com,
• newyork.grubstreet.com,
• www.scooponcones.com,
• chowhound.chow.com, and
• www.flickr.com.

Ice Cream Parlor

That these positive reviews were coming from customers and not the parlor's ownership enhances their credibility and power. Aside from the Facebook page, all the other listings came about organically without any effort by the ice cream parlor owners or employees.

The net result is that this ice cream parlor, with little effort on its part, can be very easily found on the Internet and its story is certainly being told. The very nature of its limited menu means that people do not really need to know much about all the flavors to be convinced they should visit the shop. Consequently, it probably can do fairly well without its own website. On the other hand, given its ability to easily attract a significant number of Facebook likes, it also might easily garner many Twitter followers and also use Tweets to inform followers of special flavors or coupons. It might then also use its Facebook and Twitter capabilities to further cultivate its existing store apostles – frequent customers who advocate a shop within their social networks – and garner new ones.

This ice cream parlor had very substantial name recognition and a bevy of store apostles well before or separate from any of its e-marketing activities. The strength of this non-electronic customer network substantially eased the challenge and costs of collecting 8,000 Facebook likes. A new ice cream parlor would need to expend a lot of resources to get enough Facebook likes to make its use worthwhile. The same is true of using Twitter. Indeed, one might ask if the use of these social media is cost effective for small merchants with say 30 transactions or less a day. Might they achieve the relationship building and customer service functions much more effectively and efficiently by focusing on face-to-face interactions? However, they still would need to be found online.

One thing the ice cream parlor owner probably should do is to have his young, Internet capable, employees check their listings on the special web pages to make sure they are accurate and up to date. Research has shown that this is where most small businesses are apt to fall down (12). Another thing he certainly needs to do is to keep hiring young employees who know how to use Facebook.

The prime take aways from this case study are that:

- Strong small businesses that have been around for a while probably will have strong assets that can make their entry into e-marketing a lot easier than start-ups or weaker operations.

- A robust, easy-to-be-found on the Internet capability does not always require a complex website if the merchant has sufficient positive listings and reviews on the special website pages, and a narrow range of products are offered.

- These special website pages are too often overlooked, especially by the food related operations that they so frequently cover and that account for such a high proportion of downtown businesses.

- Young, Internet savvy, employees can often be a source of the Internet related skills a small merchant lacks, but needs.

A Well-Calibrated Retail Website. A toy retailer has two brick and mortar stores in the Chicago suburbs and a very interesting website. The retailer quickly appears at the top of searches for toy stores in its two towns. Its website does not present a catalog of all of its toys but has a page that shows all the toymaker brands it sells with their logos. It does not have an e-store that sells scads of different toy products online. Its e-store is limited to selling just one new toy a week. Customers can sign up to get the "new toy" newsletter each week via email. The website has short movies, one to two minutes long, for each of the new toys. The website shows that the "new toys" are sold out every week. That they are sold out so often strongly suggests that the retailer is building up a core of repeat purchasers. Repeat customers are the makings of a band of store apostles, a solid revenue stream and a strong word of mouth network.

The website reportedly was put together and is maintained by a relative of the store's owner who is skilled in developing websites. It also has a Facebook page that has garnered 604 likes. People in the 35-44 year old age group are its most frequent visitors and they are most likely parents.

The important take aways from this case study are:

- The one new toy a week strategy is a great example of how calibrating a small firm's deployment of an e-marketing tool to its level of available resources can help assure its successful use.

- The site appears to be meeting all of the "being found" challenges, while also building a core of store apostles and making significant online sales.

- Family members can often be a source of the Internet related skills a small merchant lacks, but needs.

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HOW CAN DOWNTOWN ORGANIZATIONS HELP?

The transition to e-marketing calls upon small merchants to innovate, something most of them feel very uncomfortable doing. Experience with trying to get small merchants to improve their facades suggests that many more – but not most – would innovate, if innovating can be made easier for them to do (13). This means providing them with needed information in easy to digest terminology and helping to bring the costs of their innovation down to affordable levels.

Some questions to which they may need answers are:

- What can they do and accomplish with e-marketing, what are the benefits and how much will it cost?

- Are there local merchants who have made this transition who they can talk to?

- Which types of skilled people will they need help from to get into e-marketing? Where can they find them? Or who can do a whole package for them?

- How can they afford to create and maintain the e-marketing effort?

Here are some actions downtown organizations and other EDOs might take:

- Post a 20-minute webinar or podcast on the organization's website – that the merchants can access at their discretion, when they have sufficient time – focused on what small merchants can do with e-marketing, its benefits, and costs.

- A tie-in to SCORE or other free or low cost consulting assistance to help clarify the connections between the e-marketing tools and the firm's overall marketing objectives.

- A mentoring program that connects e-marketing "newbies" to local merchants who have successfully made the transition.

- Provide a vetted list of technical assistance providers.

- Most importantly, offer each merchant who lacks a website a web page on the organization's website that can provide name, contact information, information about products or services sold, and the firm's story.

- Perhaps the downtown organization can charge a fee for an "enhanced page," i.e., updating, writing copy, supplying graphics, creating movies, etc., that would be meaningfully lower than what the merchants would have to pay if they did it by themselves.

- Provide website consultants to merchants at a lower than market rate cost, because the downtown organization can aggregate member demand and "buy in bulk."

- Provide an expert, on a reduced fee basis, who can help merchants get listed on special web pages. This is something different than search engine optimization.

- Use a downtown organization's strong Facebook and Twitter presences to help the merchants get sufficient likes and followers to be able to effectively use them. It is getting followers, not setting up and using the Facebook or Twitter page, that now impedes most small merchants from effectively using these e-marketing tools.

- Set up an "e-department store" where merchants, like the toy store described earlier, would only sell a few items. A dedicated and limited e-department store may be a good way to strengthen a downtown niche.

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