



## **How Retailers Can Increase In-Store Traffic By Leveraging Online Web Forms**

### **What a Web Form Is**

Most retailers (and their customers) know what a "web form" is on a website. A web form is simply a "form" element on a web page where a customer or prospect can "submit" specific, formatted information to the retailer online. Web forms are used to ask customers for all sorts of information such as name, address, phone number, a comment or short message, and any other information that may be needed by the retailer. In fact, there is really no limit to the kind of information that web forms can be used to collect on a typical retail store website.

### **How Web Forms Work**

A web form is typically a small program, or "script", that the website designer embeds in the code of a web page. Customers visiting the web page see the web form as being similar to a paper-based form containing "labels" and various types of "fields". The label "Name" on a form, for example, would describe the field next to it as being where a person's name should be entered. The label "Address" would describe the related field where an address should be entered, and so on. Actually, "fields" may also be represented on a web form as "check boxes", "radio buttons", or "drop-down" boxes containing predefined choices.

### **Submitting a Form**

After a customer fills out a web form on a retail store website the next step is to "submit" the information to the retail merchant. Web forms always include at least one "button" at the end of the form called the "Submit", or "Send" button. The information in the form is not sent to the retailer unless the online customer clicks the Submit button. There may even be a second button at the end of the form called the "Cancel", or "Reset" button which will clear all of the typed information from the form in case the customer wishes to start over or wants to abandon the web form altogether.

### **Receiving the Submitted Form**

Once the form information is "submitted" the information is automatically sent to a specific e-mail address belonging to the retail merchant. The website owner receives the information where it is handled in a manner that is appropriate to the purpose of the web form. The form information could be a request for a product brochure, a phone call, a price quote, or whatever. The form information may even be a request to be added to a retail store's "Preferred Customer Club" or some other customer loyalty

program that the retailer may have in place.

## **How Online Web Forms Can Boost In-Store Traffic**

Once a retail merchant receives a "form submit" from an online customer or prospect an opportunity to start a profitable "conversation" with that person begins. This conversation, if handled properly, has the potential for pulling that customer or prospect right into the retailer's brick-and-mortar store where a purchase decision is made. The secret, however, is understanding how to initiate and cultivate this new relationship that starts at the store website and continues on the retail sales floor.

### **Use Web Forms to Start a "Conversation" With Customers**

The key to using web forms to initiate a conversation is the "offer". Visitors to a retail store website will gladly allow the retailer to capture information and initiate a conversation with them if two conditions are met. First, the retailer must present an "offer" to the customer in exchange for capturing information on the web form. Without a compelling offer the chances for capturing the information on the web form are slim. The second condition is that the retailer must be perceived as being totally honest and trustworthy.

#### **The Offer**

The "offer" is absolutely critical to a retailer's success in capturing customer information on a web form and initiating a profitable conversation that leads to an in-store purchase. The offer must meet four criteria: 1) It must be perceived as genuinely compelling and valuable to customers; 2) It must be cost-effective for the retailer to make; 3) It must be easy for the customer to redeem; and 4) It should cost very little or nothing to deliver to the customer. If these four criteria are met then the retailer can reasonably expect to be successful in collecting customer information using a web form.

Examples of successful offers might include: "Pet Stains on Your Carpeting? Download our FREE Guide on How to Make Them Vanish!", or "Download a FREE \$25 Discount Coupon on Your Next Purchase", or "Get Access to Our FREE Video and Learn How to Polish Your Car Like the Pros!". Each of these offers are cost-effective, easy for the customer to redeem, and can cost virtually nothing for the retailer to deliver. All the customer has to do is give the retailer three basic pieces of information in exchange which I will discuss later.

#### **The Perception of Trust**

The online customer MUST trust the retailer - or at least lack any suspicion about the business - or else the retailer's offer becomes nullified. Unfortunately, the general public has become increasingly suspicious of businesses that engage in shady or flat-out dishonest practices on their websites. This fact has presented a challenge for honest retailers that want to build their businesses - especially with first-time customers. We discuss a number of online practices in another article that explains in more detail how legitimate retailers can protect their good reputation on the Internet.

## **How Web Forms Should Be Presented on the Retail Store Website**

We recommend that at least one web form appears on the website home page. This form should also be positioned "above the fold" on the web page so that the website visitor does NOT have to scroll down to see the form. Finally, the retailer should only ask for three pieces of information from an online visitor - especially if the retailer has never done business with the visitor before.

The three pieces of information that the retailer should ask for on the store's home page using a web form are: Name, Email Address, and "Permission". This basic information is everything a retailer needs to initiate a conversation with the customer or prospect. Asking for anything more at this stage only casts unwanted suspicion on the retailer's intentions. Retailers should keep in mind that most people are cautious about when and where they give up personal information on the Internet.

A retailer wants a customer's name because, well, it's easier to converse with someone when you know their name. The web form may not always elicit the customer's real name, but any name is a start. A helpful tip is for the retailer to only ask for the customer's "First Name" on the web form instead of using the more threatening form label "Name" or "Full Name". A retailer should keep in mind that the customer will offer his or her name - and far more - later on if a successful relationship is built.

The customer's email address gets a little more personal and there is a natural tendency for a customer to offer a false address. No one wants to have their email address show up on a spammers email list. However, we use a simple system that insures most of the email addresses our retail store client's receive are legitimate.

The "Permission" piece of information is usually represented on a web form by a simple check-box. The box is preceded with a label that makes yet another "offer" to the customer. "May we add you to our 'Preferred Customer List?'" or even better "May we send you free discount coupons in the future?" We don't recommend using "Can we add you to our e-mail list?" because customer's have a hard time visualizing a specific benefit by getting on another email list.

Once the customer submits these three pieces of information the conversation starts and now it's up to the retailer to start cultivating that new relationship.

## **How Web Form Submits Should Be Handled**

What a retailer does NOT want are thousands, hundreds, or even dozens of form submits coming into the Inbox from the store website everyday without some way of managing all of that customer information. Every minute that clicks by before the retailer responds to a form submit, whether it be a request for more information, a brochure, or a downloadable coupon, causes the new relationship to start withering away. Ideally, the retailer should have a system in place that automatically receives the emailed form submits, collects the customer data into a database, and then sends the retailer's offer back to the customer to complete his end of the deal. Furthermore, this type of system should be one that even the smallest retailer can afford.

Our company recommends subscription-based software tools from [FormLogix](#) and [Caspio](#) that enable a retailer to easily design a form and embed it into the store's website starting at less than \$2 per month per form. Plus, each time a website visitor completes and submits a form the information is automatically added to a secure hosted database that is associated with the form. Furthermore, a FormLogix and Caspio form can be set to automatically send an "auto-reply" email back to the customer. This auto-reply email would contain the retailer's link where the customer can receive your discount coupon, how-to guide, special website access, or whatever the offer promised.

Eventually, the retailer can log in to his or her [FormLogix](#) or [Caspio](#) account, export all the customer information that has been collected, and take the customer "conversation" to the next level. This information can now be used to accomplish what I promised from the beginning: Leverage web form data to increase in-store traffic. The retailer has explicit permission to use every name and email address in the online database to send an email about a new product, an in-store event, a big seasonal sale, or a close-out on a particular line of products. The opportunities to leverage such information is endless and will enable the retailer to drive traffic into the store almost on demand.



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