

Websites that Work

By Lisa Freeman

The antiques business is in a state of major change. The old way of doing business – single dealer shops on a country road – has virtually disappeared. Group shops, which emerged in the 1980s to help dealers cut costs, are struggling. Antique shows, which continued to flourish through the 1990s, are experiencing dramatic decreases in attendance. In other words, people no longer want to go find antiques: they want antiques to come to them.

Dealers have traditionally tried to sell directly through advertisements placed in trade newspapers. For some dealers, this has proved successful, but for most of us, even a large ad isn't big enough to present more than one or two objects at a time. This does not mean that I don't believe in advertising, because I do. But advertising should be seen as part of a larger strategy and not as a primary vehicle for selling individual items.

The good news is that the internet now presents a genuine addition and alternative to traditional sales channels (shops and shows). Until recently, most dealers were reluctant to invest in a website because they didn't believe that you could sell antiques over the web: Buyers had to see and feel the object in order to be comfortable making a purchase. This is now changing.

Internet Shopping Comes of Age

According to Internet World Stats, 68.6% of the U.S. population is now online. The rapid spread of high-speed broadband access (as opposed to the slower dial-up access) means that high-resolution images can be downloaded quickly onto a computer, a big step forward for antique dealers trying to do business over the web. A recent study (Pew Charitable Trust, May 29, 2006) reported that 42% of Americans now have high-speed broadband Internet access at home, a 40% increase over the prior year.

More important, perhaps, the key audience for antiques (affluent Americans) has readily adapted to shopping online:

Rich consumers are more likely to shop online. Overall, 34 percent of respondents said they made an online purchase during the past year while 50 percent of mass affluent respondents and 57 percent of the highly affluent used e-commerce. (Package Facts, January 2005)

Our own antiques business has benefited from this trend. Our sales through the first six months of 2006 are up 30% over last year (and we are doing far fewer shows), and more than half of those sales began and/or were completed via the internet. Some purchases (a surprising number) were made sight

unseen, while other inquiries resulted in someone coming to our shop or to a show and making a purchase. Our site averages between 400 and 500 visitors a day, and we routinely receive email from new visitors. Without a doubt, our website is the single best investment we've made in our business.

Ten Common Mistakes (or How to Waste Money on Building a Website)

1. Not putting inventory on your site. A website with a couple of information pages (biographical information, a description of your merchandise, information on how to contact you) is of little use and can in fact have a negative effect on your attempts to build a web audience. Why would someone return to your site? OK, it may be useful in the same way that a phonebook is useful, but useful is not the same thing as effective.

2. Not putting all of your inventory on your site. An increasing number of dealers now have sites with partial inventories. I understand that keeping a website up to date can be time-consuming (more below), but if you are going to go to the effort and expense of building a site, it doesn't make sense not to take full advantage of it. The more material you put on your site, the more likely you are to make a sale.

3. Failing to keep your site up to date. This is the biggest mistake that I see people make. The key to building a loyal web following is to refresh your content regularly. Customers won't keep returning to a site if they see the same thing over and over again. And once you lose a customer, it's very difficult to get her back, especially if you didn't know her in the first place (your best web prospects are often "lurkers" – people who visit regularly but have not yet made a purchase).

4. Poor navigation. The KISS rule applies here (Keep It Simple Stupid). Internet shoppers are becoming savvier about how to navigate websites, but no one wants to spend time trying to figure out how to get around on your site. If a new user becomes frustrated because he can't find what he's looking for, he won't return (see #3 above).

5. Too much glitz. Forget the Flash animation. Antique buyers are looking for antiques, and they will not be impressed by fancy technological gimmicks.

6. Too many clicks. The cardinal rule of good web design is to minimize the number of clicks it takes for a user to find what she wants. Use a clear, hierarchical side menu to list the kinds of antiques you carry, and make sure that clicking on a category gets the user directly to your merchandise.

7. Overuse of icons or pictures. Some web designers favor the use of icons or photos to represent categories. Again, you are asking users to do something besides look at your inventory if you expect them to figure out that a picture of a chest of drawers means “case furniture.” Use words to navigate and pictures to sell.

8. Poor photographs. If you want a visitor to consider your merchandise seriously, present it in the best possible light. Invest in a good digital camera (minimum 5 megapixels) and learn how to take (and edit) good photos. Remember to resize them for rapid downloading. Although broadband is spreading, many potential customers (especially those in rural areas) are still using dial-up connections.

9. Inadequate descriptions. Someone has found something on your site that she likes, but she doesn’t know how big it is or whether it has any restoration. Some dealers argue that leaving details out means that the customer will have to call (or email) with questions. Our experience is precisely the opposite. Including dimensions, restorations, and other information instills confidence in internet shoppers, and building trust is key to a successful site.

10. No prices. Like inadequate descriptions, failing to include prices puts people off. I know that many people disagree with our policy on this score, but our customers tell us over and over again how much they appreciate knowing whether an object they’ve fallen in love with is within their budget or not. Including prices also saves you from having to answer lots of email. Virtually everyone else who sells on the internet includes prices; so should you.

Ten Best Practices (or How to Make Money with Your Website)

1. Make your site “sticky.” In other words, give people a reason to hang around. The more time someone stays on your site, the more likely she is to make a purchase or an inquiry. You can do this by including other kinds of useful information (links to your favorite dealers, publications, and other antique resources), your show/travel schedule, or information about your specialty.

2. Add content. Content benefits your site in many ways: it increases stickiness; it reinforces the impression that you are the expert in your field (you are, right?); and it gives search engines something to hang on to over time. Unlike your inventory (which if you are selling, is going to be removed frequently), static content pages – articles, advice, show reviews – remain in place over time.

3. Start an e-newsletter. If you already have a site but aren’t getting enough traffic, try a quarterly electronic newsletter. Embed links in the content to bring customers back to your site. Our most recent newsletter brought in the biggest increase in traffic in two years and resulted in five sales in 72 hours. For examples, see <http://www.fiskeandfreeman.com/newsletters/default.htm> or http://www.jmaggs.com/Current_newsletter.htm.

4. Get a good statistics package and use it. You can glean a lot of useful information from your web statistics if you take the time to understand them and if you re-visit them regularly. What times of the day (or days of the week) are people most likely to visit your site? (This is a good time to upload new inventory.) Which categories of antiques do people visit most frequently? (Maybe you should buy more of those.) Which pages do visitors leave from most frequently? (Maybe that article wasn’t such a good idea.)

5. Respond to every inquiry you receive, no matter how annoying. As your site becomes more popular, you will inevitably receive a stream of not-very-interesting email from people looking for free appraisals of their grandmother’s silver service. A polite, “I’m sorry but we do not do free appraisals” might surprise you. One of the biggest benefits of our site is number of buying opportunities it has given us.

6. Do link exchanges. The more links that there are to your site, the more the search engine spiders will find you. Exchange links with dealers whose merchandise you respect. Do not exchange links with large aggregator sites or commercial directories that will require you to imbed their logos on your pages.

7. Advertise your site everywhere you can. Make sure your web address appears in all your print ads, on your business cards, on your receipts, in your automated email signature – everywhere.

8. Shop around for a good web designer and host. I know several dealers who thought that they could save money by buying an “easy-to-use” web package and doing their sites themselves. Many never find the time to actually build their site, and even those who do discover that it’s too much work to maintain. You wouldn’t try to pull your own tooth, would you? A good designer will make your site effective and easy to maintain, and the up-front investment will be paid off in no time.

9. Update your site weekly. I can’t say this enough. If you do nothing else, keep your site up to date. We estimate that maintaining our site takes approximately 5 hours per week (including photography and photo editing; entering descriptions, dimensions, and so on; and uploading to the site). It’s taken us some time to get the routine down, but it is now a routine. There are worse ways to spend a rainy afternoon, and when you make a big sale after dinner without ever leaving the house, it will seem well worth the effort.

10. Make the time to do it right.

Lisa Freeman is half of Fiske & Freeman: Fine and Early Antiques. She specializes in marketing communications and website design for antique dealers (www.lfreemanmarketing.com).

This article first appeared in *New England Antiques Journal*, August 2006.