



THE E-COM 24: WHY THE STOCK MARKET IS LAUGHING

e-com

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Being Better by Being Best

The extra work to be different in your field can reap major rewards, far surpassing the effort.

WHAT CAN E-COMMERCE OFFER MY CUSTOMER that's not available in a "real world" store? This should be among the first questions asked before you place the company's future online. Yes, the pundits will tell you that everyone is or soon will be online selling everything they used to sell in the corner store. Bricks are quickly giving way to clicks to let the customer buy, they'll say.

They, whoever they are, also seem to be convinced that there will be no way to buy almost anything except on the Web. When? That's open to a strong debate but if there is a consensus out there, the answer is sometime soon but not just yet. In the meantime, there are some things every company can do to improve its standing in the market. Most notably, do something different.

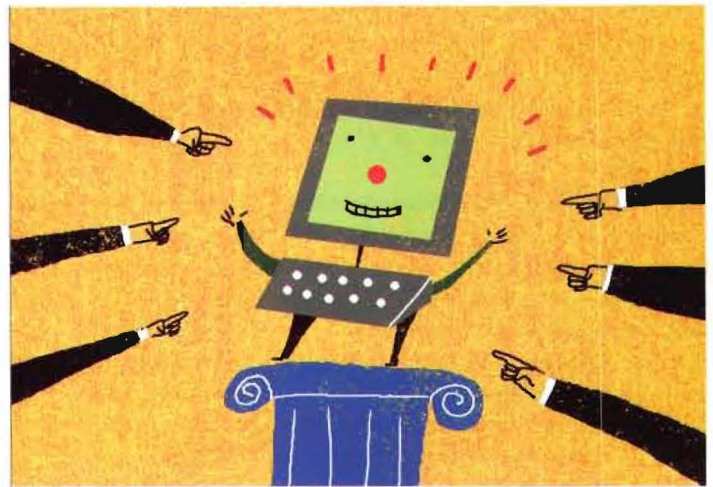
If you believe that the Internet is today, tomorrow, and forever, then there is no use waiting to do a careful analysis of what you and your company hope to accomplish moving to e-com from f2f-com—face-to-face commerce. Like the slogan says, "Just do it."

But if you see your e-commerce efforts augmenting and supporting the previous traditional business and business model that you have followed, then there is more to life than having a Website.

Suzanne Lowe, president of Expertise Marketing, www.expertisemarketing.com, Concord, Mass. conducted a survey among executives in several industries to find the best ways to differentiate a company in today's marketplace. Her findings showed that, while most companies are actively seeking ways to make themselves stand out in their markets, the ones that are taking the "easy way out" are the less successful in achieving that elusive goal.

One of the results of Lowe's study was that programs that had the highest success rate were also those that could be classified as being among the more difficult to implement. She also found that larger companies are more likely to use differentiation to improve their business than medium and small firms.

This might not seem illogical since large companies have, usually, more discretionary funds available to try new and different approaches. But it does seem to fly in the face of the traditional entrepreneur of the lean, flexible, fast-moving small company. Indeed, if the size of the company was the critical determining factor, big companies would be in a constant state of reengineering while small companies stagnated.



Hopefully, that's not the case. It certainly doesn't appear to be in the e-commerce arena. Just moving some of the larger companies onto the Web has been a teeth-pulling event while start-ups abound in e-land.

So if everyone is doing it, moving to the Web, and the cost of entry in dollars and effort is fairly small, how will this improve the company's image as a successful venture? As Lowe says, "The most difficult approaches to differentiation, such as adding new services, pursuing mergers and acquisitions, sharing financial risks with your clients, are often those that are the most successful. Implementing new technology can be put into that category as well."

But it isn't enough just to be there, you have to be there in a different way than your competition, and that doesn't mean having a cuter home page or more technical bells and whistles. It means offering something that is more desired, better, and different than what is offered by your competition on the Web and off.

An analogy might be to putting up a new sign outside the building. That's nice, but does it really tell the world what you do better than anyone else? Putting up a Web page tells the world you exist, telling them why they should care is a lot harder.

Defining the goal of being better, while being different, all while being the same—that is, being on the Web—can be a confusing conundrum. If getting up-and-running takes up the planning time, the results might be more less than more more.