

# Dealer Web Sites Create Traffic, Sales

*Getting your web site to enhance your dealership, draw customers and add to the bottom line requires planning, strategy and targeted effort.*

BY DAN SHELL

**T**he significance of the Internet in dealers' sales and marketing efforts can't be over-emphasized. Back at GIE+EXPO in October, during a Dealer Experience discussion on the significance of the Internet, Ariens Co. CEO Dan Ariens noted his company's fastest-growing segment was on-line sales.

"I think we're going to see more and more Internet transactions, people clicking to research, clicking to buy," Ariens said, explaining how Ariens works to manage the process to ensure the local dealer is involved with setup and delivery. He added that company research shows as many as 85% of Ariens' sales have been referenced on-line.

Ariens shared the discussion with Stihl Inc. President Fred Whyte, who noted his company doesn't sell on-line, but uses its digital prowess and on-line resources to help drive customers to Stihl dealerships.

"You are the voice of the expert with your customers, and we want the customers in your stores," Whyte said, noting that Stihl recently added a "virtual tour" feature to its dealer site offering, giving customers a chance to see inside a business. "At the end of the day, there has to be a local handshake."

## Site Goals

A quick surfing session checking out a half-dozen or so lawn and garden



*What do you want your web site to do for you and your business? Sell? Promote? Inform? Take time to decide on a web site plan for your business that reflects the changes in consumer behavior and the overall increase in e-commerce.*

dealer web sites shows that dealers have varying objectives of what they want their web sites to do for their businesses. Some are very timely, with daily or weekly specials; others offer extensive used products for sale or large parts sales operations. And then there are those that are little more than a one- or two-page online business card: a photo of the storefront, maybe the owner, a couple of product line logos, a directions map, operating hours and that's it.

PET was researching this article at the right time to contact Jim Kilgore, owner of Bluegrass Lawn & Garden in Louisville, Ky. In early December, he said he was about a month into working on the second makeover for the dealership's 8-year-old web site, which is hosted through ARI Network Services.

"We've never really worried too much about it and never really pushed this side of the business," Kilgore said, adding that the 30-year dealership has had a web site for eight years and has made "no real effort" to generate sales through the site.

Now, Kilgore is looking to drive more on-line traffic to his site and is also adding used equipment and parts pages. So far, he's been working with search engines to see his site come up higher for people in his region seeking lawn and garden products.

"We feel like we have no choice but to do it," Kilgore says. "It's the times we're in and people are doing more shopping and business on the Internet."

Greg Olson, owner of Olson's Outdoor Power Equipment in Muskegon,

Wis. (highlighted on page 22), says he started his web site six years ago, also through ARI. Initially, the site was mostly informational. "We featured our whole goods, a few sales specials, mainly just telling everyone we were here," Olson remembers.

He began to see the power of the Internet a few years later when he was looking to move some overstocked snow removal equipment and worked through Google and Yahoo to move his site up on the search engines. "We moved a lot of snowblowers—everything went," Olson remembers.

After the overstock move, Olson made an effort to sell larger parts volumes through the web site through search engine investments, but increasingly found that many customers wanted parts almost immediately, and shipping costs were problematic. "We mainly use the parts page on the site now for customers in our area to look up the parts they need and do troubleshooting so we can get them in and out of the store quicker," Olson says, adding that he has three workstations at his showroom's front counter and the dealership has been thoroughly computerized since he started it in 1995, beginning with a parts lookup system.

"You've got to be looking ahead and invest in new technology," Olson believes. "You can't run a business without being future-minded."

## Site From Scratch

In Florida's Panhandle, Seville Power Equipment in Pensacola has been computerized since 1988, starting with a Tandy Radio Shack computer with 32K memory, says owner Jim Brazil. Running with a basic, informational web site, Brazil says he looked for several years to find the right person to give his Internet effort a major makeover and bring it into the 21st century.

He brought in Mikhail McMillan to develop the site further, which meant adding and promoting more sales functions and also finding more ways to reach out to customers through interactive features and social media.

When he first started with Seville Power in early 2010, "The site was static and had about five or six pages," McMillan says. "We took the same elements, but made it more dynamic." Doing so included adding links to specific products and product specs and also bargains and sales specials pages.

To reach out to customers, Seville added its new PowerUP newsletter e-

mailed to customers in PDF format, plus weather forecast links and hurricane/ weather alerts for the region's frequent summer thunderstorms and occasional major weather events. McMillan adds that one of the most popular features among pro customers is the stolen equipment email notices. "We've gotten a huge response on that; it's very popular."

He adds that much of the customer outreach effort ties in to social networking. McMillan is still working on building the company's Facebook page and has started a Twitter account as well.

One example of reaching out through social media is video taken at Seville Power's Pro Day last year that included appearances by local Hooters girls who demoed some of the mowers. McMillan uploaded the video to Youtube, titled "Sexiest Exmark Mower Demo Ever." He adds that move has driven lots of traffic to the dealership's site.

On the sales side, McMillan is continually seeking to drive both site and store traffic, which generates more sales, and he's especially promoting consumables and accessories as sale items. He's also pushing the company's eBay store that seeks to sell obsolete parts. "I don't see us being an overnight parts seller, but we're trying to hit it at all angles," McMillan says.

One service feature recently added is for generator customers—and this includes many RV generators—who can schedule service times on-line. "Generator customers who need service can punch in their desired times, and the information goes straight to the service manager who can schedule them," he adds.

## Site Smarts

Another statement made during GIE+EXPO's dealer discussions with Ariens and Whyte, Dan Ariens noted the soaring consumer use of web site access from smart phones. He cautioned: "If your web site can't be navigated from a mobile phone, within 10 years you'll be toast."

Indeed, more and more consumers are taking their computers with them in the form of phones and using them increasingly as tools when shopping for work or play.

Brad Smith, ARI product manager for e-commerce and web sites, says he's been hearing reports of increasing smart phone usage from the company's marine and power sports clients for several years, "but it seems like just in the past

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year we're hearing more about it in outdoor power." He adds that the trend reflects the overall growth of e-commerce: More people are accessing web sites when they are on the go, at work and during their daily activities, not just kicking back at home."

Smith says the number of mobile phone web site users is growing, with price shopping (admittedly no dealer's favorite call to take) and geo applications by mobile users seeking the closest dealership for an emergency parts buy being the top two reasons for mobile access.

Essentially, there are two ways for dealer websites to handle smart phone access: the site employs user agent detection and modifies its content, or when the site detects a mobile user, it directs that user to a specially-designed mobile user version of the dealership's site.

User agent detection—what most sites already do—is a system that finds out what browser the customer is actually using, and adjusts the web page accordingly. Having a separate mobile version of the site requires more up-front work, but eliminates any hassles with phone-browser-site compatibility.

McMillan says he's already reserved

a site name for Seville Power under the ".mobi" domain reserved for mobile phone sites. He believes taking that approach is easier on both dealer and end user. "You don't have to worry about auto-detector running different scripts, and when they go direct to a 'mobi' site they'll see a pared down version with no background and less graphics that takes less time to load," he says.

For those wondering about the smart phone compatibility of their own sites, here's some advice and tips from Rick Henkin and Karl Kasca from [www.increaseonlineprofits.com](http://www.increaseonlineprofits.com):

- Mouse over your phone number on your computer. If you can highlight one number at a time, your phone number is "text." If the whole number highlights, it's probably an image. You want to use text phone numbers, so that cell phone users can just click or touch the number to dial it. If it's an image they're going to have to write down or try to remember the phone number

- Flash—If your website uses flash, all the smartphone user is going to see is a big, empty box. At this point, cell phones are not able to handle complex technologies like Flash.

- Make sure the text is large enough

to be viewed comfortably on a mobile device.

- Page Width—Most mobile phones open web pages at a default view of 980 pixels wide. If your web pages are wider than that, you force users to scroll from side to side.

- The less information you require your visitor to input, the better. Typing on a cellphone is still not as easy as on a full size keyboard.

For those who may consider creating a specially designated mobile version of your current website with its own URL, understand that a mobile friendly design has its own guidelines that need to be considered including:

- Offer specifically targeted information. Mobile users are not usually shoppers or browsers, they want useful information quickly.

- Organize content so the amount of scrolling is reduced.

- Minimize the number of clicks.

- Organize the site vertically, not horizontally as on a desktop computer.

- Reduce the number of internal links and limit the use of graphics.

- Place the navigation lower on the page so users don't have to toggle down to view the page.

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