

Using the Internet to Secure Your Competitive Advantage



Imagine a media that allows you to focus your marketing message to the *specific* people who are looking for your products and services? Impossible you say? Not so. That's exactly what the Internet does and that's why now, more than ever, your salon or day spa needs a website.

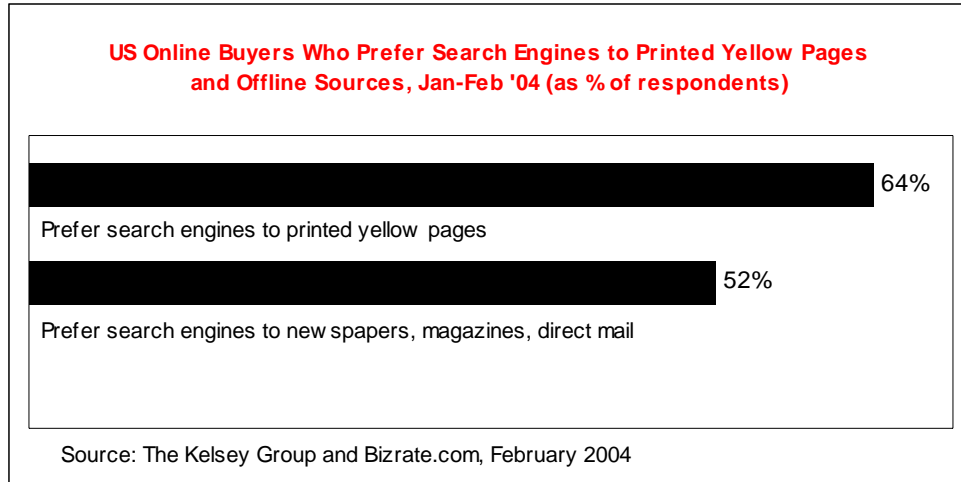
You don't have to be a computer guru to realize that the Internet is here to stay. With 69% of US adults accessing the web, we can pretty safely say that it's not a passing fad. Each day, hundred of thousands of Internet searches are performed on the products and services that you sell. The chart below shows results for a sampling of four search terms used by the beauty industry.

| Search Term | Searches done in Jan.04 |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| skin care | 124,414 |
| dry skin | 15,038 |
| day spa | 66,443 |
| spa gift certificate | 1563 |

These numbers, taken from Overture, represent Internet searches for the month of January'04 - real people seeking information about your business.

Unlike newspaper advertising where your message is distributed to thousands of people (most of whom have no interest in your business), the Internet only serves your marketing message to people who are actively looking for exactly that information. For example, if a web surfer searches on the term "skin care", he or she will receive information about that topic and related topics but not about "sports cars." The Internet only drives qualified prospects as traffic to your website.

In the February 17th article, *Tapping Into Local Search Advertising*, eMarketer.com states that online buyers prefer Internet search to printed Yellow Pages, newspapers, magazines, and direct mail.



According to Nielsen//NetRatings (May 2003), female Internet users perform more online searches than men. Most of their queries involve home fashion, personal care items and **cosmetics**. A study published by comScore Media Metrix, found that affluent Internet users (those with household incomes greater than \$75,000) spend more time online, view more pages, and spend more money online than any other demographic. This group has discretionary income to spend on your products and services. Doesn't it make sense to put your marketing efforts into their preferred media – the Internet?

Why Your Salon Needs a Website

As we saw above, the Internet has become one of the most powerful marketing media today. By tapping into the efficiencies of the Internet, your salon or day spa will get more customers and, at the same time, save money over traditional marketing venues. Your salon website can be the most important marketing collateral you will ever develop. If you're in doubt, just search online or look in a local telephone directory and see how many of your competitors have websites. What do your competitors know that you don't, and how will the Internet help your business?

1. Expand Your Market Reach

One of the greatest benefits of the Internet is an extended market reach. You can capture a greater share of beauty industry dollars at a fraction of the cost of traditional advertising. Your salon's message will be available to new customers who are actively seeking your services. These new customers will range from local residents to out-of-town visitors, all interested in your services for themselves or as gifts for friends and relatives living in your service area. With little effort, you can draw hundreds, if not thousands, of visitors to your website each month. Think of the impact to your bottom line, if only a fraction of them become customers!

2. Your 24-Hour Business Directory

Your salon website allows you to have a 24/7 virtual business directory that tells the world about your services, how to contact you, and why they should. It allows you to differentiate yourself from the competition. Think of your website as a broadcasting tool that supplies customers with up-to-date information about new products, new services, and special sales offers.

Unlike traditional advertising where you pay by the word or the column inch, your website allows you to include as much information as you like at virtually no additional cost to you, the advertiser. It costs the same whether you need a paragraph or page to describe your services.

3. Create Awareness - Exploit Your Brand

Your website can offer a complete product and service catalogue so visitors can research information any time of the day or night. Current information is instantly available without printing and distribution costs. A well-crafted message will create excitement and awareness about your brand. Imagine the impact on sales when customers pre-sell themselves on products and services they see on your website!

4. Email Marketing Reinforces Your Brand

According to [Pew Internet & American Life Project](#), email remains the "Killer Application" of the Internet. Ninety-five percent (95%) of women and 90% of men have adopted this communication tool. Not surprisingly, this same study shows that seniors use email regularly; they have embraced email as a means of staying connected with family members.

How can this help your business? Savvy marketers use email newsletters to keep their brand and marketing message in front of customers and prospects. Use a salon newsletter to build trust and confidence in your brand. Tips and feature articles can establish credibility with you as an expert beauty advisor. Build "opt-in" email lists to deliver promotions, special offers and product/service information to subscribers. The cost of producing and delivering an email newsletter is a fraction of the cost of printed media and postage.

Email newsletters keep you connected to your customers and prospects, and allow you to build stronger relationships. The personal nature of your business is dependant on fostering a strong affiliation with your customers. A successful newsletter will increase sales, improve customer retention and strengthen customer loyalty.

5. Other Email Communications

The Internet also helps you stay in contact with vendors and distributors at any time of the day or night. Cut down on the aggravation of costly phone calls and playing "telephone tag."

6. Provide Customer Service

Many commercial websites publish a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) to assist visitors in product and service selection. A thorough FAQ section allows your customers to “self-service” reducing the workload on your staff.

Here are a few more ideas that you can use on your website to improve customer service:

- Provide a “Tips” section with product knowledge and hints about usage.
- List your “Policies and Guidelines” – list the credit cards you accept, cancellation policies, and procedures related to “late or no-shows”.
- Post customer service forms and email addresses to encourage feedback.
- Create customer surveys to keep up with the needs of your customers.

Exemplary customer service will differentiate you from the competition. Encourage feedback because it will highlight areas that need improvement.

6. Online Sales

Many day spas and salons sell gift certificates and products online. This provides a revenue stream with high profit margins. Online transactions eliminate the need for sales personnel and costly sales commissions.

7. Use Your Website to Advertise Job Openings

Your talented staff is one of the primary reasons you’re successful. Recruit talent directly from a page that highlights the benefits of working for your salon. Be sure to provide an online form so they can submit the relevant information.

8. Reduce costs

An effective salon website and associated online marketing efforts will reduce your overall cost of marketing. You’ll save hundred of dollars on printing and distribution of brochures and newsletters. Your front desk will handle fewer information calls and be busier making appointments. Your sales staff will spend less time pushing products and more time educating their clients about the benefits of products. E-commerce websites realize additional benefits because of the added revenue stream and higher profit margins.

What Does a Website Cost?

Many salon owners think that a website is a big expense. Well, surprise – it isn’t. You’ll need to register a domain name, which is the unique name that identifies your website. There are several places where you can do this. The largest and best-known registrar is Network Solutions. Domain name fees ranges from \$35 for a single year to \$149.90 for ten years.

Next, you’ll need to find a hosting solution, which is a service provider willing to rent you space on a server that’s connected to the Internet. Hosting companies can be found all over the Internet. You’ll even find them in your local telephone directory.

The service provider you use for Internet access probably has a plan. Shop around, and don't jump into an expensive plan. Your hosting solution does *not* have to be located near you. You'll never be visiting the place. Costs range from \$4.95 to \$35 per month. Don't pay more than that.

For maximum impact, you may want to hire professional designers to develop your website. Most will offer services that include programming, graphic design, and content development. The costs vary considerably based on the number of pages, programming involved, and other considerations. Be sure to get a quote or a proposal for the work before you begin. Yours is a niche market, so be sure to find a company that is familiar with the beauty industry and your particular business needs. The design team you hire should have great communication skills, be responsive to your needs, and above all, be trustworthy.

Before beginning your design project, spend some time developing a website strategy. Look at market demographics, your current customers, influences on their buying decisions and, most importantly, your competition. Create clearly defined website goals. Consider the following website business objectives:

- Establish an Internet presence
- Improve branding
- Expand marketing
- Acquire new customers
- Increase sales
- Generate salon information requests
- Offer customer service

If you have the in-house talent to develop a website, put them to work by collecting pictures and photos (.jpg or .gif file formats) to go up on your site. To make the job easier, you may want to buy web-design software. A few good choices are Dreamweaver, FrontPage and GoLive. Your marketing message should be "punchy" and to-the-point, clearly stating the benefits of your products and services. Bear in mind that your website must reflect the same professional image that you strive for in your salon. You want your website to leave a positive, lasting impression on your visitors. If it doesn't, another salon website is just a click away.