

# How to Convert Browsers into Buyers



A study on engaging with website visitors,  
building trust and driving sales

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## **The Web 2.0 gold-rush is on**

The internet is being hailed for changing business models, the way people shop and the manner in which businesses communicate. Commentators everywhere are predicting that Web 2.0 can only succeed where the previous internet gold-rush failed.

Businesses of every size and description are rushing to setup shop online and tap into the millions busily searching for products and services. UK online sales have been increasing year on year at around 36%, whilst in the US they grew 20% in the first quarter of 2007 to a [mammoth \\$47.5 billion](#).

As broadband spreads and consumers spend more time online, there's no reason to think growth is going to slow anytime soon.

That doesn't mean, however, that you can just upload a virtual version of your company brochure and expect the sales to flow. There are more hurdles to be overcome in building trust online than there are in the bricks and mortar world.

As ecommerce approaches maturity, shoppers are becoming ever more web savvy and expecting more from online retailers in terms of usability, information and the efforts made to win their confidence.

## **Ecommerce faces unique challenges in building trust**

If you're selling a product that isn't just differentiated by price then you have an even harder challenge on your hands.

If simply bombarding consumers with sales messages is proving ineffective in the offline world then it certainly isn't going to work online.

You have to be able to find a way to engage with consumers online as you would in a shop. You have to be able to answer their questions and maintain their attention long enough to educate them on the value of your product or service.

There are many challenges facing both B2C and B2B websites:

How do you sell to consumers averse to advertising?  
How do you build trust online?  
How can you convert more visitors into buyers?  
Why should you be giving away content for free?

These are all questions I intend to answer based on research conducted in the last year that highlighted why more investment needs to be made into your website's content if you want to be able to convert browsers into buyers.

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## Consumers are ignoring advertising

There's a growing sense of unease in the advertising world. They're discovering that they've been bombarding consumers with marketing messages for so long that they're now being ignored. Mindsets have simply started blocking out language they don't think is genuine or of value to them.

The modern day consumer now has more channels competing for their attention than ever before. They are more cynical, less trusting and more selective of whom they will reward with their attention.

Advertising and marketing faces new challenges. The way you communicate is going to have to change too if you want people to listen.



Instead of raining down sales messages from above you need to be able to sit down with your consumers and relate to their interests and desires in a helpful manner. If you want them to spend time with you then you have to be offering them something of value. This can be in the form of the latest news, advice on choosing the right product or a case study of how you've solved a customer's problem.

You now sell through education; not shallow sales spiel.

People are not going to purchase just based on the clever copy on your homepage. To sell products you first have to win trust by demonstrating your expertise and knowledge.

You can achieve this through your content.

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## Use information to gain trust

[Accenture](#), a business management consultancy, released a [report on internet shopping](#) habits that highlighted the lack of consumer trust.

They discovered that although a healthy 69% use the internet for researching products only 33% will actually go on to purchase.

It's time to consider what the hurdles are tripping up these online shoppers before they get to the checkout till. They're surfing the web with the objective of buying, but then not gaining enough confidence to make the purchase online.

A survey by market researchers [Harris Interactive](#) (May 2007) discovered that consumers need abundant access to information before they can reach a buying decision.

From their responses from nearly 3000 shoppers they found:

- 57% now research products and services online before making a purchase.
- 44% have abandoned a purchase altogether due to the lack of information.
- 45% wanted to be able to find the answer to their questions themselves, rather than wait for an email.
- 69% of consumers will now go to the manufacturer's website if they have a problem, even if the product was purchased from an independent store.

Harris Interactive assessed that:

*"An effective way for retailers to differentiate themselves from the competition is through customer experiences."*

If you can't compete on price then you have to find other ways to differentiate yourself. You can achieve this simply by demonstrating your expertise through your content and positioning yourself as a knowledge leader.

Shoppers make buying decisions based on trust; not just on price.

If you provide answers to all their questions, and remove the hurdles blocking a sale, then you can increase the chances of them becoming a customer and purchasing from your website.

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## To convert browsers into buyers be helpful

A separate study, by [eGain](#), has shown how UK businesses still have a long way to go if they want to provide a satisfactory shopping experience.

eGain's research found that only 17% of 125 businesses offered acceptable customer service solutions on their website. This was assessed in terms of the quality of the information available, the ease of finding answers and the response times to queries.

Each study gives further backing to the conclusion that to convert browsers into buyers you need to be providing content of value that gains trust and answers all their questions.

Exactly the same philosophy applies to B2B customers.

In June, [Enquiro Search Solutions](#) conducted a survey of 1000 B2B buyers:

- When a B2B buyer becomes aware of an interesting product or service offline (e.g. at a trade fair) they normally follow up with online research.
- When arriving at a website B2B visitors are most interested in finding simple and clear product/service information in a downloadable format. This makes it easier for them to share their research with colleagues and present it to the ultimate decision maker.
- Support information is also highly desirable i.e. general company information, case studies, white papers and knowledge bases.
- The least desired content was the 'bells and whistles' such as podcasts, webinars and multimedia presentations.
- Half of those interviewed would follow up their visit by purchasing online.

Enquiro's research follows on from a similar study they conducted in 2004 that drew the same conclusion: you need to provide clear, useful information in a format that visitors can share with colleagues.

If you're selling a product online that isn't just differentiated by price then you need to promote your knowledge and expertise as a reason to buy. You do this by educating visitors on your products and services in an open, transparent format, and not with marketing language.

If you don't provide the information buyers are looking for then they will simply have to look elsewhere for answers. This could force them to go make an offline purchase - or from a competitor's website.

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## Word of mouth is now global

Web savvy consumers are spending more and more time researching products and services before they're ready to buy. This includes reading reviews, blogs and comments in forums.

If they find criticism of your product then it is likely to scupper a sale, particularly if you've chosen to bury your head in the sand rather than respond.

Market researchers [Ipsos Mori discovered](#) that a third of the shoppers they surveyed had been put off a purchase by negative comments, whilst over half had immediately whipped out their credit card based on positive advice.

Ipsos Mori's head of technology research, Gareth Deere, commented:

*"We all trust people's opinion in the real world. Now we've proven the same link online, and it's having a major impact on people's buying behaviour...word of mouth is no longer restricted to close friends and family, it can have the same level of influence upon millions across the world."*

For your business to succeed you have to understand the route shoppers will take before reaching the checkout. They'll search for a product or service, (hopefully) find a link to your website, check other sites for reviews and comments before returning later on to make a purchase if their confidence has been gained.



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## **Be honest and genuine, or you'll be found out**

As the dominant search provider, Google have welcomed their role in the sales cycle as being the bastion of transparency.

[Google CEO, Eric Schmidt said:](#)

*"It's clear, over the next few years, that people will have access to far more information than they can ever handle. And that is a good thing: that more information crowds out bad ideas, bad information, bad governments, bad behaviour."*

Search engines, such as Google, have made it easier than ever before to share and track down information. This means anybody peddling poor services and misleading advice can be exposed by a web savvy audience more than happy to spread the word. [Just ask Dell.](#)

Being honest and genuine in how you engage with consumers will be the only way to communicate if you want to be listened to and believed.

As an [article in Wired](#) magazine commented:

*"Being transparent, opening up, posting interesting material frequently and often is the only way to amass positive links to yourself and thus to directly influence your Googleable reputation. Putting out more evasion or PR puffery won't work, because people will either ignore it and not link to it - or worse, pick the spin apart and enshrine those criticisms high on your Google list of life."*

Presenting information about your product and services now needs to be more transparent and genuine if it's going to succeed in winning customers.

This includes being able to respond to criticism when it arises in an open format which people can access to allay their fears. This also gives you the opportunity to demonstrate your expertise in how you respond to problems.

You can choose to bury your head in the sand and block out the conversations taking place about your products and services.

But this just means nobody can hear you if you try to respond.

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## Invest in your content and not just advertising

At present, whilst online marketing budgets continue to grow yearly a very high percentage is [allocated to advertising in search results](#). One of the key reasons is due to straightforward cost and reward metrics.

If you know your conversion rate then online advertising can be easily quantifiable in terms of increased sales. It's a straightforward metric that marketing has grown up with and one it understands.

The problem is that the amount invested in advertising seems at odds with the amount invested in improving the shopping experience for the website visitor, which is crucial if you want to increase the numbers actually buying.

The need to consider investing more in content was highlighted by [research released by Marketing Sherpa](#) showing that online shoppers are taking longer to reach a buying decision.

The study, entitled 'Digital Window Shopping: The Long Delay Before Buying', discovered that it's now taking an average of 34 hours to convert a browser into a buyer.

The fact that it was only 19 hours in 2005 - and has since increased by 80% - has given marketers plenty of food for thought. It's time to consider how you can win the confidence of hesitant online shoppers.

Marketing Sherpa Content Director Anne Holland gave [four recommendations](#) on how websites can improve their conversion rates:

1. Every page is now potentially a landing page. It's crucial to provide an 'about us' explanation or link on every page so that visitors know where they are.
2. Grab email addresses early with offers of discount coupons, a newsletter or white paper. That way you can drive the sales process even after visitors have left.
3. Content, content, content - provide generous descriptions, specs, case studies, comparisons and reviews to remove hurdles tripping up a sale. Consumers don't just make a buying decision by price, but by trust.
4. Offer an exclusive bonus that can't be found elsewhere. Leverage your knowledge and expertise to provide the customer with something of value and you're laying the groundwork for repeat sales at the same time.

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Essentially, every point reinforces the need to be investing in white papers, case studies and product information if you want to convert more of your visitors.

Investing in content will not only improve your conversion rate, but will also boost your ranking in the search engines. Articles offering news, insight and value will get linked to by other sites, sending you more referral traffic and back-links to boost your search positioning.

Any initial search optimisation on your site can be merely transitory if you aren't regularly giving it an injection of updated content of value.

Advertising can get you visitors quickly and at a quantifiable cost. Just make sure you haven't skimmed on the shop you've built for them when they arrive.

### **Natural search results are trusted more than advertising**

The survey by [Enquiro Search Solutions](#) on B2B buying habits also reinforced the need to invest in an 'organic' marketing campaign. 'Organic' optimisation revolves around evolving your website's content to keep it fresh for the search engine's spiders, attract back-links and achieve higher rankings in the natural search results.

Getting a high ranking in the natural search results is a key goal as they're deemed more trustworthy by buyers:

- When a B2B buyer becomes aware of an interesting product or service offline (e.g. at a trade fair) they normally follow up with online research.
- Over half will begin their research via the search engines, with Google the dominant choice.
- 74% click on natural results, and 19% on sponsored links.
- The top four natural listings received 53% of all traffic.

A high listing in the natural search results can be crucial if you want to succeed. This is a long-term objective achieved by investing in good quality content that can then sit on your website to attract links and boost your ranking.

There aren't the same quantifiable metrics for investing in new content as there are for advertising. But if you plan on being online for the long haul then you need a strategy for evolving your presence, attracting more visitors and converting a higher percentage into customers.

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## Why aren't businesses engaging?

The evidence all points to the same conclusion: you need to be engaging your visitors with regularly updated, useful and informative content if you want to build trust and turn them into customers.

So what's holding back businesses from engaging?

The barrier continues to be the lack of the straightforward cost/benefit metrics needed to secure the extra funding for what will be an ongoing, long-term initiative.

A lot of internet marketers push for the need for businesses to start using blogs to engage with their marketplace in an ongoing 'conversation', instead of remaining aloof and carpet bombing sales messages. But it's the same barrier holding back blogging as with any initiative that's difficult to measure.

Insight into why many marketers' hands might be tied from starting a company blog was provided by a [Forrester Research survey](#), released in July.

Forrester assessed that it was the old traditional metrics of return on investment and an acute lack of faith in web 2.0 technology that was holding back business blogging. Only a measly 11% of the 275 IT professionals interviewed had much faith in it as a marketing tool at all.

As one commented:

*"If you can't put together a good business case that has some cost benefit justification, it's difficult to get those types of efforts launched."*

Two thirds of the interviewed IT decision makers identified ROI as the benchmark for evaluating success. This puts tactics such as blogging, and engaging with a steady flow of useful content, at a distinct disadvantage in getting funding.

Forrester analyst F G. Oliver Young noted:

*"Many business users still associate blogs with personal diaries, and some firms use blogs simply as a way to surface existing content, muting the effect."*

The problem is that for many organizations experimenting without an obvious benefit to sales is not an option.

So whilst they continue to watch from the sidelines, there's plenty of space for those brave enough to invest, pursue greater consumer engagement and reap the rewards.

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## Engage with content of value

At the high end of the scale you've got Proctor & Gamble. Throughout their history they've attempted to [engage with their consumers](#) on as many 'touch points' as possible.

From their early product placement packed 'soap' operas to recruiting an army of 'connectors' to give out free coupons to setting up interactive websites, P & G have always been generous with their marketing to build a long-term affinity with their brands.

P & G marketing chief Jim Stengel earlier this year [said of the new marketing approach](#):

*"It takes courage. It takes conviction. It takes stepping out of the comfort zone and eliminating barriers with your consumers."*

He also announced that marketing and advertising was no longer about:

*"telling and selling ...It's not about new media models or new tools. It's about engaging with people in a two way relationship."*

In our low trust world, effective marketing is about developing relationships built on trust and confidence. And there is no better way of fostering such positive bonds than by becoming a generous brand and showering your prospects with content of value.

This has been reflected in the offline world by the rapid growth in consumer magazines in the UK. Produced by companies such as Virgin Atlantic, Waitrose and Walt Disney, they are now being heralded as the essential corporate marketing tool. They are [believed to be read by 79% of the population](#), and increase sales by 8%.

By providing a substance read, rather than blatant advertising, they are valued by consumers and engaged with. And not immediately treated as marketing junk to be binned.

Anthony Mayfield, from UK search marketing specialists [Spannerworks](#), [commented](#) at last years Blogging4Business conference:

*"Marketing needs to completely reinvent itself because the media world has completely changed. Success means earning attention by being useful."*

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## Be generous and you will be rewarded

One of the internet's great marketing success stories is [Stormhoek](#), a small independent South African winery competing with multinationals and winning online.

Two years ago they were virtually unheard of in their own country, let alone the rest of the world. Now you'll find their wine stocked in supermarkets all over the UK and they're rapidly expanding into the US. They achieved this by talking about their industry on their website and sponsoring '[100 Dinners in 100 Nights](#)' with free wine.

By being generous they were able to develop positive exposure and a closer affinity with their customers as a result.

Stormhoek's site now receives 350,000 hits a month and has over 225,000 back-links. Within twelve months of starting their marketing campaign sales had doubled; this equates to tens of thousands more cases of wine.

In the [2006 Drinks Business Awards](#) Stormhoek won first prize for their 'trail-blazing' consumer campaign. They were competing with hundreds of thousands of other wineries and multinationals with multi-million pound marketing budgets. The cost of their campaign? [\\$288.53](#).

The marketing for any product or service can be improved by being generous and providing content of value.



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[Topskips](#) are a waste skip hire firm and their website provides video tutorials, a blog and newsletter to assist visitors reach a buying decision. By being helpful and generous with their content they have seen their [initial investment of £5000 balloon](#) into a projected turnover of £3.5 million in just four years.

Topskips.com is the perfect example of a website designed to start a dialogue, help solve their customers' problems and drive more sales through education.

Any business can adopt the same philosophy. By providing a downloadable white paper, monthly newsletter or an informative blog, you can become a generous brand and be rewarded as a result.

None of these examples are easily quantifiable in straightforward cost/benefit metrics, but the theory behind it is obvious. If you're generous with your content and of value to the consumer then they will develop a positive impression and reward you with their trust and business as a result.

So, don't just rely on sales spiel and marketing language on your website.

Engage with content of value.

[This study is based on research and articles from The Copywriter's Crucible (<http://thewritewords.me.uk/blog>), blog of freelance copywriter Matt Ambrose.

If you've found this report of interest then you might wish to [subscribe to the blog](#) to read more follow up posts on the evolving role of the engagement copywriter.]

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