

Online business puts focus on pet health

By JOAN DELANEY
Epoch Times Staff

A fondness for animals was part of the motivation behind entrepreneur Darcy Foster's decision to establish PetWellbeing.com, a website where shoppers can purchase alternative health supplements for their pets.

Foster chose this niche market upon discovering that there was a dearth of information on the topic while at the same time many people were looking for an alternative to conventional medicine when treating their pets' ailments.

It took time and hard work, but Foster has successfully tapped into the North American online market with PetWellbeing, and in the last four years business has skyrocketed.

"Like all business there is a learning curve, especially online," he says. "It has become easier now that we have created a brand, but certainly we had to invest a lot of energy into making it a destination for people who are looking for information about holistic health for their pets."

The site sells more than 120 products that offer remedies for everything from liver disease and Cushing's disease in dogs to cancer, kidney disease, and hypothyroidism in cats.

All PetWellbeing's products, manufactured in a certified organic processing facility in Kelowna, British Columbia, are developed by veterinarians, naturopathic doctors, and a master herbalist, and all undergo stringent testing.

Realizing that "a lot of websites are not that great," Vancouver-based

Foster conducted extensive "user testing" to make the PetWellbeing site a mine of information and easy to navigate.

"What we've really tried to do is to focus on our customers and give them the information that they're looking for," he says.

This involves providing comprehensive online resources for natural pet care information. The site boasts a library of over 250 articles, several blogs, an educational newsletter, and its own Wiki site.

"One of the things that differentiates us is that we have a very strong background in understanding how to get people to come to the website and how to give them an experience that is good," Foster says.

The company has offices in Vancouver and Atlanta, Georgia, and the products are registered with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for export to the U.S.

Part of the brand's success has been thanks to a "customer review" process, Foster says.

Within three weeks to a month after a customer buys a product, the system automatically surveys the customer to get feedback on that product. After going through a moderator, the review is uploaded to the website.

"If the product is having a real positive impact then other people get to see that from a third party's perspective, and that's really helped drive the business. It allows people to see how a lot of other people are using the product and the sort of success they are having with it."

As well as monitoring social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter,



PetWellbeing's products undergo stringent testing by certified veterinarians. PETWELLBEING.COM

the company uses Yahoo Answers to get the word out about PetWellbeing.

"If somebody is looking for an alternative to a pharmaceutical that they may have been giving their cat or dog that has been causing nasty side effects, they may ask that question in Yahoo Answers," says Foster.

"What we've tried to do is be in the places where the conversations are happening and introduce ourselves and introduce the PetWellbeing brand."

While conventional pet medicine certainly has its place, says Foster, interest in the alternative, holistic approach to keeping pets

healthy has grown in leaps and bounds in recent years. He believes this is partially due to the high cost of tests and some medications offered in conventional veterinary practices.

"There are a lot of people who are dissatisfied with the process that they generally have to go through now," he says.

"What we really try to do is focus on maintaining pet health to prevent illness and huge vet bills. We're just trying to offer an alternative and give people an opportunity to feed their cat or dog something that is going to help benefit or supplement their diet."

The marketing corner

Blogging: Taking your business to the web

By ADELE LASSERE

Blogging has become increasingly mainstream over the past few years. Individuals, companies, and political candidates alike are using this tool to promote their favorite cause or to market a product/service.

It is one way to sift through the noise and speak directly to the consumer. Many products have gained popularity via blogs that flamed the fires to spread the word to other online users who then became customers. As with anything, there can be potential pitfalls to using blogs as a marketing tool.

Here are a few useful tips to consider if you decide to take up the role as blogger and start a blog about your company or product/service.

- **Control.** You relinquish control the minute you start blogging. At some point a user (customer) will comment and give their opinion about your product/service offering, and not all comments will be favorable. If you see a negative opinion crop up, immediately put out positive press. Do not be defensive—just state the facts. This can be done via your Web site, e-newsletter, catalog, or responding directly on the blog.
- **Freshness.** Keep your blog up-to-date. A direct method of communication, the blog is designed to enhance communication and be deemed valuable from the end-user (customer's point-of-view). Also, be sure that the communication is not a hard sell. Hard sells, typically

negate the impact sought and suppress reach.

- **Interactive.** Ensure that the communication is a two-way street. If you don't want any feedback, then buy an ad and place it on television, radio, etc. Blogs are made to be interactive, share ideas/thoughts and communicate something of value. That's the whole point to blogging.

- **Niche customers.** Blogs can be a good tool to reach a niche (small) group of customers. Be aware that sometimes if the customers you are seeking are small in number this method may prove to be the most effective method to sell your product or service.
- **Liability.** There is the potential to be held liable when blogging. Be very careful and seek expert help if you are unsure of the content you would like to broadcast. To limit business liability, it is better to be safe than sorry.

Always consider all options when choosing the best way to communicate your company's message. Blogging has achieved great success when smartly executed. But there are risks—this is not a "place it and forget it" kind of advertising.

Adele Lassere is a marketing/advertising consultant with 20+ years experience, freelance writer and soon to be published author of "Elements of Buying: An Advertising Reference Guide for Business Owners". Contact: lassere@bellsouth.net

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Book store offers free shipping on out-of-stock items

CHICAGO (Reuters)—A U.S. bookstore took the latest step in the battle for book buyers this holiday season, promising customers it will ship items to their homes for free when they're out of stock in the company's bookstores.

Border Group Inc said the in-stock guarantee announced on Tuesday applies to books and other items carried on the company's web site. When a customer cannot find an item in a Borders store, the company will ship it to the shopper's home for free.

Borders said it believes the program is the first of its kind in the book industry.

The move comes weeks after an online price war for new titles such as Sarah Palin's upcoming book was sparked by Wal-Mart Stores Inc. Meanwhile, Borders' main rival, Barnes & Noble Inc., brought out its Nook electronic reader to challenge Amazon.com Inc's Kindle.

Booksellers have had to contend with a lingering slump as consumers have headed online, especially to Amazon's web site. Borders has been getting out of categories such as music and putting a greater focus on helping shoppers choose books. It has also cut jobs and inventory.

Borders said it added children's toys and items geared toward teens, such as Twilight-themed journals and clothing, to attract shoppers for the holiday season.

Barnes & Noble, which runs the largest U.S. bookstore chain, could not be immediately reached for comment.



EXPERT OPINION: File photo of a signboard of Anglo-Swedish pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca pictured in Macclesfield in northwest England. AstraZeneca's experimental blood-thinning drug Brilinta, which failed in a clinical study, is most likely a fluke, according to two of the trial's investigators. ANDREW YATES/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Experts say Astra drug's U.S. miss likely a fluke

LONDON (Reuters)—The failure of AstraZeneca's experimental blood-thinning drug Brilinta to benefit North American patients in a clinical study is most likely a statistical fluke, two of the trial's investigators said.

While an interaction with high doses of aspirin cannot be ruled out, Lars Wallentin of Uppsala Clinical Research Centre in Sweden and Richard Becker of Duke University in North Carolina said there were no obvious biological explanations for it.

"The most likely explanation is a play of chance, but we still cannot completely get away from (the possibility) that the higher aspirin dose that was used only in the U.S. might have played a role here," lead investigator Wallentin said in a telephone interview.

Concerns that high-dose aspirin might interfere with Brilinta were sparked last week when AstraZeneca said researchers were investigating "a possible association".

Brilinta—a rival to Sanofi-Aventis and Bristol-Myers Squibb's \$9 billion-a-year seller Plavix—is one of AstraZeneca's biggest new drug hopes.

It showed impressive overall superiority to Plavix in an 18,000-patient study known as PLATO, but its failure to prove itself in the North American sub-group—accounting for some 9 percent of patients—has been a puzzle since results were released in August.

One difference between North American patients and those elsewhere is that U.S. heart doctors often use a much higher 325-milligram dose of aspirin than in other countries when patients get a stent, leading to the interaction hypothesis.

But Wallentin said investigators had not seen any supporting evidence for a difference, with platelet inhibition levels similar and dyspnoea—a shortness of breath linked to Brilinta—actually higher in the high-dose aspirin group, suggesting more of an effect from Brilinta rather than less.

AstraZeneca filed last month for a licence for Brilinta in Europe and plans to file in the U.S. by the end of the year.

Some industry analysts fear the U.S. Food and Administration may delay approval of Brilinta because of the possible aspirin interaction, or even request new studies—though Becker said he thought this unlikely.

"Based on our understanding of sub-group analyses, it's most likely a play of chance," he told Reuters. "Will the FDA come forward and say 'Gee, you should do additional studies with different doses of aspirin'? I don't believe that they will."

"I believe that were the drug to be approved it would say that it was tested in combination with aspirin and on the totality of information 75 to 100 milligrams of aspirin may be adequate."

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