

# **WALMART AND THE RULES**

## ***Simple Principles for Building Better Websites***

*by Bob McElwain*

Recently Kevin Pine <Pine.Net> shared an argument he uses with clients in his site design business.

**It goes like this:**

Picture the greeter in WalMart stores, the one that gives you a warm welcome, offers you a cart and a flyer announcing specials for the day. Suppose this person was directed to turn aside every tenth person who enters the store, saying, "Sorry, we don't want your business today." Then asks them to leave.

If this were repeated throughout all stores, WalMart's bottom line would drop. One might guess by 10%, the number of people being turned away. But the drop would be considerably more, for costs of salaries, inventory, general overhead and such would remain constant at least in the short term. Thus the drop might exceed 20%

No successful business is likely to try this "new" technique, for it obviously would lead quickly to bankruptcy. Why then do so many webmasters apply similar methods with such determination?

**A Partial Answer**

Anyone who has ever created anything, be it a bookcase, a novel, or a website, knows how difficult it is to be objective about the results of efforts largely driven by our emotions. Since we created it, we even embrace flaws we recognize. For to do otherwise might mean discarding the result and beginning anew.

To succeed, a writer must discover what people want to read and a pleasing way to present their content. That is, they find a way to satisfy the needs of their customers. Else success eludes them. The same is so of home builders, musicians, and shopkeepers of all kinds. It is also true of webmasters.

**The Lack Of A Reality Check**

If you open a brick & mortar business, up front costs must be expended. And the on going monthly expense begins immediately. Profits must soon cover, else you go broke. Each day you total your gross, subtract a percentage for overhead, and quickly determine how much you can tuck into your pocket.

Except that start up costs are minimal, the above applies equally to an online business. However, many choose to ignore these realities. They can afford to do so for a considerable period of time, because the overhead on a website amounts to pocket money. Since they do not have to pay the rent or for new inventory, they can avoid facing the reality of impending failure almost indefinitely.

**Solid Guidelines Are Absent**

One of the problems all webmasters face is the lack of uniform guidelines. In opening an offline business, you have ample resources available that point the way to success. While

many also apply to an online business, specifics about the Web are lacking.

Many come to the Web determined to do their own thing at any cost. Go for it, if that's your wish. But to succeed, reverse the emphasis. Do what your visitors want in the way they want it done.

### **First Comes A Flawless Site**

If your website is not closing sales or achieving its purpose, as in generating leads, then fix it. Else pack it in. This is the reality of offline marketing lacking on the Web. Offline, shutting down will soon be forced upon a failing business. Online, valuable time and dollars are wasted in sustaining a site that does not get the job done. Since we are not being hounded by bill collectors, we continue with some vague hope things will somehow magically turn around.

If you don't know what needs doing to put your site on track, get some help. Look for forums or newsgroups into site performance. Swap your time in evaluating the sites of others, for their's in examining yours.

If you can afford it, hire a professional. Learn what he or she knows that will help. Then go find another. No one individual has the whole of this game in hand.

### **Learn The Rules**

If you've been online for a time, you already know some rules. You may need to learn more. Use Verdana or Ariel on a white background, for either is much easier to read on a monitor than Times Roman. Limit main or bounding table widths to 600 pixels. Narrow cells/columns as required so that line lengths are a maximum of 65 characters. These are simple things. While many continue to debate them, it is wasted effort.

While breaking these rules may not turn away ten percent of your visitors as our hypothetical WalMart greeter did, why risk it? Why do anything that annoys a visitor, thus encouraging him or her to leave? While it's true you can not please everyone, it also makes sense to minimize site characteristics that may annoy.

### **About Branding**

Of the continuing debates about doing business on the Web, the one I ignore completely is the notion of branding.

"..., the quicker picker upper." This is branding. Chances are you connect this immediately to Bounty paper towels. You may even remember one of the actresses featured in the TV commercials.

If I were standing before a shelf of paper towels, all things being equal, I'd probably reach for Bounty. But when I think of the megabucks expended in boosting this name, it's difficult to believe the manufacturer has recovered costs. There's not much profit margin in paper towels.

### **Forget It**

On the Web, branding is often associated with splash or entry pages, those artsy slow-loading presentations within which you must find a link to the main site.

This won't work for a small business. You have no chance of obtaining brand name recognition without a major corporate presence and an awesome dollar commitment. So

forget branding. And forget those splash pages.

**Are You Turning Away N% Of Your Visitors?**

The validity of many rules can be difficult to demonstrate. This is a no-brainer. Check the hits on your splash page and compare the count to that of the page it links to.

Now tell me you are confident you can succeed in business turning away over ten percent of your potential customers.

**WalMart couldn't make it happen.  
And neither can you.**

Bob McElwain - Want to build a winning site? Improve one you already have? - Fix one that's busted? - Get ANSWERS. -  
Subscribe to "STAT News" now! - [join-stat@lyris.dundee.net](mailto:join-stat@lyris.dundee.net) - Web marketing and consulting since 1993 - Site:  
<<http://sitetipsandtricks.com>> - Phone: 209-742-6349

Published by:

**SURVIVAL MANUALS**

<http://www.survivalmanuals.com>

A division of  
Ironheart Enterprises  
64-432 Waiahu Street  
Kamuela, HI 96743