

LUSH LONGBOARDS LTD

Through the development of its e-commerce website Lush Longboards achieved 50% of a niche UK market.

OBJECTIVES

Many organisations in specialised sectors such as medicine or IT there is a large customer cross-over between extreme sports such as mountain boarding, kite boarding, surfing, snowboarding and skating. Lush Longboards make 'extreme sports' boards, predominantly long skateboards, balance boards and wakeskates. It also sells related products from other manufacturers which make protective gear, clothing, spares and accessories. Its own products are distributed to a network of retailers and also directly to customers. Although active people will spend a lot of money on their equipment, high street retailers are often hesitant to stock such items because the number of local buyers is relatively small and the items take up large amounts of display and storage space.

Lush Longboards wanted to tap into this burgeoning market of enthusiasts who are geographically dispersed, technologically adept and often cash-rich. As a small business concerned with controlling costs and maximising efficiency, it calculated that its best strategy would be to develop an online facility that would automate the process of order-taking and stock-keeping as far as possible, so that both trade and retail customers could select products place orders without any human intervention, leaving staff free to concentrate on other activities.

SOLUTION

The company's founders made a decision to build their web solution in-house. After two years trying various systems, the e-commerce side of the website is now provided by an open source package which has been modified in-house to create, "improvements beyond any other out there," according to Chris Tanner, Director of Lush Longboards. "We have taken an open source e-commerce package and modified it to speed up and improve the order process, packing procedure, stock checks, accounting, sales forecasting and so on. Customers are kept up-to-date regularly about the status of their orders with the use of text messages, a first in our field. Card payments are handled by a third party."

The automation of the website and associated back-end administration systems allow staff to spend time working on other areas of the business. Because the target market is online

Best practice in:
Teleworking

Sector:
Services / other

Size of firm:
4 employees

Location:
Norfolk

Website:
www.outsec.co.uk



“Selling online enables us to hold a large stock of very niche items, because our target audience suddenly becomes huge, the sport is still young and riders are spread around; the website also allows those around the country who may not be near each other to communicate.”

CHRIS TANNER – DIRECTOR, LUSH LONGBOARDS

and geographically unrestricted, the company can afford to hold a good stock of very niche items. “For high street retailers, our site makes it easy to get hold of items that are old stock, special editions or unusual,” Chris explains.

“The site is a complete e-commerce solution,” says Chris. “Products can be purchased, orders tracked and so on. But we also offer a huge amount of information about the sports of longboarding, mountain boarding and kite boarding. The site’s forums provide a hub for the UK scene.” This additional functionality has proved very important in bringing users to the site on a repeated basis. Lush Longboard’s customers are also kept up-to-date through e-mail newsletters.

RESULTS

The site is now the largest of its kind in Europe. “We estimate that we have about 50% of the UK market share of sales for longboards and specialist skateboard products,” says Chris. “We’ve learned a huge amount about online marketing, brand promotion and ease of administration for keeping the website and the customer storefront fresh and vibrant.” These developments helped the company build a turnover approaching £500,000 in two years.

In the process, the company has also built up a loyal customer base. This is essential to its future success and provides it with a captive and willing audience for market and product research, which is carried out through web feedback forms and email.

CHALLENGES

Developing an in-house solution represented a major challenge but has now proved a winner. However, as with all e-commerce sites, it is a constant task for Lush Longboards to keep the ‘storefront’ up-to-date and exciting.

Ironically, the burgeoning site may carry its own problem, as Chris explains: “possibly we have too many products on the site.”

Top tips:

- Open source software can provide a cost effective way to produce a leading-edge site, if staff have the requisite programming abilities.
- Forums on the website provide a hub for people who are interested in the sports for which it sells products.
- Prioritise some tasks more than others, rather than improving the easy-to-fix but sometimes low-gain problems, look at improving the aspects of the business that give more gain.





LAST WORD

“We are the first UK business to provide these products on the scale that we do,” says Chris. Now the company plans to split the manufacturing and brand of Lush Longboards from the direct selling of third party products. “This will require two websites, one aimed at customers – very much along the lines of the current site – and another for manufacturers and distributors, to give them brand information and re-ordering facilities,” he says.

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