

From its base in rural Northamptonshire, Sillyjokes.co.uk sells thousands of joke and party products to customers all over the world. Its highly efficient operation and ability to immediately dispatch goods to anyone, anywhere has been made possible due to its adoption of broadband.

OBJECTIVES

Most joke shops are unable to stock more than a small proportion of the vast range of joke and party products that is available – practical jokes, wigs, masks, fancy dress, party tableware, gag gifts and props. For their customers, this can create huge frustrations. Purchases are thwarted by the lack of stock for inspection and by the delays involved in ordering and receiving goods.

Despite being based in the countryside, Sillyjokes.co.uk wanted to be able to provide next-day delivery of almost any product to its customers and it recognised that an e-commerce facility would provide this ability. As a result it carefully planned and developed a website that enabled it to offer over 3,000 items. It built relationships with suppliers so that order placed through the site would be fulfilled directly by the supplier – ensuring prompt dispatch to the customer. And the company's systems interact with those of its suppliers so that its customers can always be sure that the items they want are in stock.

However, all this online functionality provided a number of problems. In particular its dial-up connectivity restricted its abilities to update its 15,000 page website, exchange data with suppliers and respond to clients. It also resulted in delays as a result of the ever increasing volumes of spam and computer viruses.

In order to provide the responsiveness that was crucial to the growth of the business, Sillyjokes.co.uk needed an internet service that was much faster and reliable and would enable it to integrate its systems fully.

SOLUTIONS

Sillyjokes.co.uk researched and subscribed to a broadband service provider. This gives it extremely fast, high quality internet access and has enabled it to make huge savings in the time it takes to update their website and also in processing orders. Its broadband service provider also filters out the large amounts of spam and viruses that infest e-mail and would otherwise delay business, especially at busy times such as Halloween and Christmas.

Best practice in:
Broadband, rural e-business

Sector:
Other

Size of firm:
4 employees

Location:
Towcester, Northamptonshire

Website:
www.sillyjokes.co.uk



“People ask us if we would like to open a high street shop, but nothing could be further from our heads. We like to concentrate on our online customers, rather than be distracted by walk-in visitors. The website is the crux of our store. We would not be able to sell more than 3,000 products from an 800 square foot unit if it were not for the web.”

CAROLINE CREASEY – DIRECTOR, SILLYJOKES.CO.UK.


Sillyjokes’ website was developed entirely in-house, after careful research into the needs of its customers and the usability standards of the web. The site is expressly designed to enable search engines to index its contents and this, in turn, makes it easy for would-be customers to find the items they want. Caroline Creasey, one of the company’s Directors, says “Search engines love our site as they can easily spider down through the layers and we frequently see new pages listed on page one of Google within a day or two.”

In addition, the company offers a number of free games on the site and allow other sites to add these games to their own pages. This creates links back to SillyJokes and helps raise its ratings in Google. These free content pages generate about 1,500 of its 10,000 daily page views.

Behind the scenes, the site runs off a database which generates the web pages and new pages or complete changes can be made easily. The company’s back office system has a customer database to control stock across two warehouses, create and print orders, and provide financial and reporting functions. Orders are passed electronically, directly into Sillyjokes suppliers’ systems for immediate fulfilment, and the suppliers’ systems send back stock data up to ten times a day. This ensures that Sillyjokes can offer a huge range of items while keeping its website’s stock information up-to-date and accurate in order to increase customer satisfaction. This relationship with suppliers means that it has instant access to over £1m worth of stock without having to pay for it and have the capacity easily to process increasing numbers of orders, or very large orders. “Planning ahead for increased capacity is key,” says Caroline.

Careful consideration of its market means that products are grouped around similar items so that all ‘hats’ are grouped together, for example, and are also linked to other related products, so cowboy hats are linked to sheriffs’ badges. Every item is individually photographed for display on the site, rather than simply scanned from a catalogue, to offer the best possible quality of content.





Finally, credit card orders are processed by a third-party organisation, using secure encrypted connections.

The system works smoothly. As Caroline relates: “Just yesterday we were able to supply 160 pairs of comedy glasses to one of the country’s largest companies which required them the next day. The order was placed online by our customer, we made a couple of visual checks and sent it through for dispatch with just three clicks and they will have it today. No one else in our sector can come close to doing that.”

RESULTS

With efficient web updates, prominent search engine positioning and streamlined connections to its suppliers, broadband has fuelled Sillyjokes’ rapid growth. “The store grows daily, and we have exceeded our initial plans immeasurably,” says Caroline. With more than 10,000 visitors per day, revenue growth is running close to 98% annually.

The good connectivity enables Sillyjokes.co.uk to make the best use of its ‘drop shipping’ arrangements – directing orders straight from suppliers to customers – and this has enabled it to grow much more quickly than if it tried to fulfil, manage and ship the stock itself.


“Without broadband we would not have the capacity to meet the needs of our customers at key periods,” says Caroline. “We also absolutely love selling daft stuff on the internet. We have met this aim absolutely every day and have a bell to ring when anything of note is achieved.”

In addition, Sillyjokes.co.uk is the winner of the National category for rural e-business in the DTI and InterForum Awards for E-commerce, in recognition of its recent business achievements.

CHALLENGES

Managing a 15,000 page website presents an unrelenting set of challenges and the company is planning improvements to the web design and the delivery of more dynamic content to help this process.

A growing number of people with disabilities want to view the site, as well as those accessing it via mobile phones or handheld computers. These pressures are prompting a move towards the use of a layout relying more on CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) which will improve the readability of the web pages for such users.



Sillyjokes constantly need to ensure that the user experience is easy and simple, while continuing to offer an unparalleled range of items.

The company lost some days' trading when its online payment provider, which processes its card payments, was targeted by hackers. As a result, Sillyjokes is setting up alternative payment methods, which will also provide users with a greater range of payment options.

Top tips:

- Keep things simple and eliminate as many steps as possible from your processes.
- Plan ahead for increased capacity.
- Always think about creating systems to reduce the number of problems you have to deal with each day – put yourself inside the head of those who use your site to ensure that you answer their needs, rather than waste resources on resolving customers' problems at a later date.

LAST WORD

We have a much wider range of products than people would find locally," says Caroline Creasey. "For instance we have approximately 375 sizes and styles of balloons. Even if someone could find pink, glitter top-hats locally, they probably wouldn't be able to get 150 delivered within 24 hours. But we can! We have instant access to over £1m worth of stock without having to pay for it."

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