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Retailers use the Web to advertise, optimize, maximize their brand

FURNISHINGS HAVE BECOME big business on the Internet. And with this month's roll-out of Homefurnishings.com, the NHEA's new consumer portal, coming so soon after the Las Vegas World Market Center's launch of Homeyet.com, it's about to become even bigger.

If you happen to be reading this at the High Point Market, you can get a good look at the new Homefurnishings.com site in the Retailer Resource Center on the first floor of Plaza Suites. When I first heard about it, I couldn't help but think that the features and functions sounded very similar to Homeyet.com:

- Both sites have put a lot of time and talent into building editorial content, design tips and planning tools to entice shoppers, home decorators and stylish nesters to peruse their Web pages.

- Over the next couple of years, WMC and NHEA are spending in the seven-figure range to advertise, optimize and maximize their Web presence and search engine results to make sure their sites get frequented with lots of traffic.

- Both sites provide a store locator, searchable by zip code, to make it easier for the consumer to find a reputable local retailer who can deliver the goods.

But, as similar as Homefurnishings.com and Homeyet.com sound, they're not competitors. In fact, it was NHEA's retailers that initially populated WMC's Homeyet.com store locator database, the same group of retailers that will initially populate Homefurnishings.com's store locator database. At Homefurnishings.com, though, things get a little more involved.

Homefurnishings.com has put together a program where, for a fee, the retailer can customize a permanent Internet microsite that will act as a link between Homefurnishings.com and the retailer's brick-and-mortar locations. In other words, instead of landing on an address, the results of the shopper's store search takes her to a Web page, that could lead to the store's own Web site, that will hopefully direct her to the retailer's online catalog or front door.

The arrival of Homefurnishings.com and Homeyet.com couldn't have happened at a better time – Internet commerce and the use of social media have exploded. This year, for the first time, an online-only retailer made Home Accents Today's list of the Top 50 Home Accent Retailers (by sales volume) – privately held Art.com of Emeryville, Calif., which sold more than \$150 million worth of art and wall decor in 2008.

Last year, home and garden products accounted for a whopping 50% of sales at Overstock.com, earning it a spot on Furniture/Today's list of the Top 20 Online-Only Home Furnishings Retailers. **CSN Stores, which counts**

Allcoffeetables.com, Upholstery.com and Accent-furniture.com among its brands, sold more than \$200 million of furniture, bedding, home decor and housewares in 2008. Fulfillment of home furnishings orders also contributed to the hefty \$19 billion in total sales at Amazon.com last year.

I also checked in with a few of my independent retail friends to see if, and how, the Internet and social media are affecting their business operations these days. Here's what they had to say:



The National Home Furnishings Association is launching its new consumer Web portal, Homefurnishings.com, this month.

We have a Facebook page with 158 fans and a goal of 1,000 fans by this time next year. We just started it in the spring. It's a great way for us to update clients on new products and services in a non-intimidating, fun way. — Dawn Wilkinson, Six Walls, Mercer Island, Wash.

Blogging has been a huge asset to our business since day one. We grew a national customer base so when we launched our Online Boutique, we had a primed audience. We use the blog to show new product, go behind the scenes at seasonal

events, take our customers to Market... We use Facebook and Twitter to communicate less story-centric, immediate info bursts: hot new shipment, what I'm unpacking this very minute, save the date, etc. All three tools have been huge assets in terms of communicating with local customers, growing an online customer base, and raising our brand profile. — Abby Kerr, The Blissful, Canton, Ohio

Creating a blog is one of the best business decisions I have made. Keeping it personal, so people feel it's being written directly to them, is important. Also, the frequency of posting is important. Generally, I post once per month ... maybe twice and rarely three to four times. I keep a paper at my desk and add talking points every day. The customers that have subscribed to the blog sometimes get a bit of special treatment: private sales, free products, advance notice of special events, etc. I think a Web site is great as a base to introduce your business, however the blog shows the soul of it, and that is so important. — Lisa Swan, Kaza Designs, Concord, N.H.

The final word on this topic goes to Mary Liz Curtin, owner of Leon and Lulu in Clawson, Michigan. Mary Liz said she's "slowly moving on to the social networking scene, reluctantly blogging, Facebooking and Tweeting." And though it's a struggle to remember to do it, and even harder for her to think of what to say, she sees it as an inexpensive, timely way to interact with the store's younger customers. "In my opinion," she said, "social networking should go back where it belongs — to cocktail parties and handwritten thank-you notes." ■