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WHEN BRENT ELIAS began working at CSN Stores.com in 2002, the Boston-based online home furnishings retailer didn't have an affiliate program. Elias began his career at CSN working in the advertising department on the keywords team. Like many retailers, CSN Stores was afraid that affiliate marketing would cannibalize sales from its main online store.

But as the privately-funded company grew, it began to see that affiliate marketing might add some value. No one at the company knew much about affiliate marketing, so Elias, who showed interest, started researching the best way to start a program.

Beginning in July 2005, Elias spent several months researching all of the major networks and which would best fit with the unique business model of CSN Stores. He knew that it would have to be a long-term relationship and didn't want to jump into anything. He did his homework looking at sites that discussed affiliate marketing and pouring through online forums such as ABestWeb.com to help educate himself and make a better decision.

By October of that year, CSN Stores was ready to dip its toe into the waters of affiliate marketing. The company chose ShareASale as its network. Elias says that he spoke with all of the other major networks but none was able to accommodate CSN's desires to have a single merchant ID that let affiliates work with any of the company's 250 online stores. Most of the networks claimed that the stores would have to be grouped together by categories and CSN would end up having something like 20 or more accounts.

Make it Simple

Elias knew that would be too confusing and troublesome for affiliates. He also couldn't imagine how his company would log into and manage so many accounts efficiently. Elias says ShareASale was the only network willing to host all 250 stores under a single merchant ID – giving affiliates a single place to get creative. It also allowed CSN to set things up so that affiliates could work with the main CSN store or just pick the niche stores – like CSN Rugs or CSN Baby – that they were interested in promoting.

ShareASale was also willing to work with CSN Stores to create custom datafeeds, along with a unique tracking system and custom designed analytics. Elias says that level of personal service was "a breath of fresh air" and won CSN over.

Wanting to jump right into things, Elias attended ShareASale's first annual ThinkTank retreat in 2005, just two weeks after launching the CSN Stores program. He says it was an eye-opening experience and set the tone for how he deals with his affiliates.

"It wasn't that we were doing things wrong, but we were still figuring out what affiliates wanted," Elias says. "At ThinkTank when everyone gets into a room and seasoned affiliates lay it on the line and don't hold back, you take that information and feedback to heart."

Elias says he learned right off the bat about being fair to affiliates, and that the merchant-affiliate relationship is a partnership. "I don't think all merchants see it that way," he notes.

Because ShareASale is a smaller network and many of its merchants and affiliates prefer to work exclusively with them, Elias says that was a selling point. He figured that the network's stance on adware and downloadable applications (it doesn't allow it) meant he wouldn't have the headaches of policing a lot of issues related to cheating and bad traffic. "In addition, I figured that it would also give our affiliate peace of mind that cookies were set for them and that there would be no cross-tracking problems with other networks."

By inviting feedback from affiliates, Elias learned CSN's affiliate interface was confusing and he was able to work quickly to get that changed. He was also told that CSN's datafeeds were overwhelming and contained way too much information. He worked closely with SAS to change the data feed structure so affiliates could get only the information they wanted – whether it was by product category, specific stores or master feeds.

Forums, Feedback and Facts

CSN Stores has an active forum on ABestWeb.com and Elias is always there to post information and answer questions, or just take feedback. "I love it and have learned a lot there," Elias says. "It has a family atmosphere. It can be rough around the edges, but what I love is that people put their heart into affiliate marketing. In the end, I respect that."

A while back, CSN Stores made a decision to pay coupon sites a 2 percent commission on an order when they were last in the click stream. That decision did not go over well with all his affiliates. Elias says that for CSN's business model it wasn't an ideal situation to partner closely with coupon sites. He's not convinced of the overall value of the traffic the couponers bring to him, but CSN decided they deserved a small cut of the commission on an order. On ABestWeb, CSN took some heat, but Elias says that he was able to give his reasons for the change in policy, "talk people down from the ledge," and be honest and forthcoming about the business decision.

As an affiliate manager, he believes it's important not to get defensive or mad, but instead to be open and hon-