

BRETT'S CROC HATS

Location: Darwin. Australia
 Employees: 3
 Industry: Manufacturer/Retailer
 Web site: www.croc-hats.com.au

Best Practice in Action

Brett's Croc Hats does not just make hats, it makes crocodile leather goods, such as wallets, stock whips, boots and shoes, and also retails crocodile skulls, teeth and a number of other products created as a by-product of the crocodile. If it is high quality Crocodile products that a customer desires, then the first port of call must be Brett's Croc Hats. The products are made from farmed crocodiles that are sourced from across Australia, with strict licences required to be involved in the industry.

The Motivation to 'Go Live'

Brett's Croc Hats, as a business entity is located in Darwin. The region is known for its spectacular scenery and depends a great deal on tourism to keep the local economy buoyant. Brett's Croc Hats is no different. The product that it produces is focused, in part, at the tourist looking for the special souvenir to take home to lands or towns far afield. Product is supplied to souvenir retailers across Australia. The geographical isolation of Darwin has been challenged by this particular business with the use of the Internet to broaden its market to places such as Denmark, Brazil, Japan and the United States.

Darwin's tourist industry, like any other, experiences peak and lull times. In Brett's Croc Hats case, this translates to very low turnover for close to 3 months of the year. One of the strong motivations to entering the world of e-commerce was to create an avenue for turnover when the tourists were not coming to Darwin.

Approximately 50 to 60 percent of the product that Brett's Croc Hats sells are to foreign tourists. The Internet knows no nationalistic boundaries and therefore seemed a natural step for the business. The foreign customer base could be easily accessed through the Internet- no longer does the purchaser have to be in Australia.

The Website

The site itself has been designed and maintained by Brett Meehan, the owner of Brett's Croc Hats. This approach has meant that there has had to be a concerted amount of time and effort invested by Brett to learn about the Internet and how to write in HTML. However, this approach has also meant that Brett is in absolute control of the 'look and feel' of the Web. The website reflects the core business.

Many of the businesses customers are from abroad and not familiar with the nature of crocodile products. Photographs are, therefore,

The geographical isolation of Darwin has been challenged by this particular business with the use of the Internet.

BRETT'S CROC HATS

an important part of marketing on the internet. In the traditional retail environment, a customer can see and touch a product. This is not available via the internet. To overcome this barrier, the website has a full photographic catalogue of all products that are available, not just sample pictures of some of the products. The inclusion of the huge photographic files means that the loading time of the front page is compromised. The core customer base is interested viewers, not 'surfers' randomly choosing the site. Therefore, the decision to have photographs for a good first impression was made, rather than having a fast site time.

Internet shopping capabilities have been added to the site. A shopping cart that is easy to use and secure has ensured that customers can feel at ease when placing orders using the internet. In recognising the international customer base, a currency converter, which is updated at least every two weeks, has added a degree of sophistication and customer service to the site.

Brett has taken it upon himself to maintain and update the site. He is the owner and proprietor of the business and therefore has the most knowledge about the products and quality. By maintaining control of the site, he is able to answer quickly any questions or queries that come through e-mail. In addition, a conscious decision was made to put on the website only products that were available and obtainable. Customised or special products as a rule, are kept off the website. This decision has given the website a level of credibility, if you order it, you will have it in a few days. However, if special product is requested, then the Company can work with the customer via e-mail to design, manufacture and meet the needs of that customer.

Relationship Building

The website that Brett's Croc Hats has developed has been marketed as an integral part of the business. The physical business and the virtual business support each other. On all of Brett's products, business cards and promotional material, the URL is included. Customers can contact Brett's Croc Hats easily through the Internet to purchase more products if they desire.

The business can also communicate more effectively and without time delay to its customers on a global scale. New products can be introduced and marketed with little outlay. In addition, creating individual communication links with its customers around the world is enabling the business to conduct cost-effective market research. Through e-mail feedback, the business is able to determine what customers want and desire. This ongoing relationship with a 'tourist-based' clientele is unique and enabled by the internet.

New Opportunities

Through the Internet, Brett's Croc Hats has experienced a number

In recognising the international customer base, a currency converter, which is updated at least every two weeks, has added a degree of sophistication and customer service to the site.

of new opportunities. The Company was asked to be the manufacturer and supplier of crocodile products for a French Television documentary on people that work with crocodiles. Programme producers found the Company from the internet.

Retailers and Resellers from nations far afield are ordering bulk shipments of product. This is giving the company a new opportunity, export. Export opportunities have been made possible by the presence of the business on the internet.

The Internet has also enabled Brett's Croc Hats to find new suppliers. As an example the business was able to link up with a supplier in Switzerland that supplies dyes used in the tanning process. The head office in Switzerland introduced Brett's Croc Hats to a company representative in Melbourne and dye, that had been unavailable for over two years, was suddenly sourced and purchased.

A Road Map for Change

The catalyst for the e-commerce strategy at Brett's Croc Hats was a computer. The business did not have a computer, it survived quite well without it. At the beginning of 1998, Brett Meehan received a computer from an acquaintance. This computer was used to initiate him into the world of the Internet.

Being a true entrepreneur, Brett quickly realised the potential of this tool to grow his business. He set about learning about the Internet himself. His self-taught methods have been successful in creating a functional, easy-to-use, informative site that represents the products of Brett's Croc Hats well.

Learning how sites were built and learning the language involved Brett searching out Java group sites and shopping cart sites. Scripts that were inexpensive and easy to use were sought out and implemented. Demonstration software was also found to be an inexpensive way of learning. This software often provided buttons and images that could be used within the site at a minimal financial outlay.

A secure server was set up. In the initial stages, Brett's Croc Hats did not have a secure server. It was realised that some people were going to the site, and then placing orders by fax rather than through e-mail. The site accepts payment by credit card and so the security of the customers' details was vital to their willingness to place orders. Once the secure server was in place, orders started flowing directly across the Internet almost immediately. A currency converter was sourced from on the Internet and included in the site. Once the site was designed a host was selected and Brett's Croc Hats had a virtual presence.

The Internet has also enabled Brett's Croc Hats to find new suppliers.

Once the secure server was in place, orders started flowing directly across the Internet almost immediately.

BRETT'S CROC HATS

Maintaining the site is a matter of setting aside time. As there is no physical material involved, just computer files, it is a matter of setting aside time to check, change or create files that can be included into the website.

Creating a Web-presence

Once the website was up and running a Web-presence was established by:

- E-mail mailouts – an introductory e-mail was sent out to a number of businesses overseas, distributors and retailers that Brett's Croc Hats would like to strike a working relationship with. A number of replies showing interest were received.
- Links – Brett's Croc Hats has established link exchanges with companies involved in similar areas of business. For example a leather furniture company in the UK has placed Brett's Croc Hats as a link on their page and vice versa. It is also listed on some established crocodilian sites and it is looking to fossil dealers' sites in the future.
- The website address is printed on all labels on the products, business cards, and any promotional material.

Key Learnings

Being on the Internet and having a website does not require a huge financial outlay. Many small businesses have perhaps steered clear of including a virtual presence to their business because of the envisioned financial pressure that it will put on their business. Brett's Croc Hats has proven that with time and a commitment to learn about the technology establishing a website can be an inexpensive exercise.

A business does not need to contract outside Web designers if it has a 'get in there and do it yourself' attitude and the time and energy to commit to learning about the Web. Late night Internet-surfing as opposed to expensive training courses was the source of Brett's knowledge base.

The site has to be fully functional, this means that:

- The information on the site must be accurate, up-to-date and reliable
- Orders can be placed with peace of mind in a secure environment
- Contact can be made via e-mail or traditional methods, as the customer may choose.
- Understand the customer and include services on your website to ease their use. i.e. Currency converters.

Brett's Croc Hats has proven that with time and a commitment to learn about the technology establishing a website can be an inexpensive exercise.

Overall Impact

After twelve months, the virtual side of Brett's Croc Hats makes up 10 percent of the total turnover of the company. However more importantly, the sales generated over the Internet are consistent and not seasonal, as are the 'real world sales'. Without the website, for three months of the year, Brett's Croc Hats would struggle to meet its commitments.

In addition, the isolation of Darwin has been nullified through the website. Brett's Croc Hats is entering into a new era of commerce. One that is geographically independent. Now a Texan can have a genuine Australian crocodile skull or a Japanese woman can have a pair of crocodile shoes, without having set foot in Australia. Brett's Croc Hats is becoming an internationalised company via the Internet.

Brett's Croc Hats is becoming an internationalised company via the internet.



