

## **Management Article: What Are Your Customers Saying About You Online? The Tools to Keep Track-April 2011**

Whenever I think of the importance of the Internet to small businesses, I think of a USA Today article I read in Nov. 2009 about start-up airlines.

Kent Craford and his partners started SeaPort Airlines in June 2008. Since the aircraft are small, passengers don't have to pass through TSA checkpoints.

Instead of going through security at Portland's PDX and landing at SeaTac, a half-hour to 45-minute drive south of Seattle, SeaPort's 9-seater aircraft use a private air field at PDX and land at Boeing Field, six minutes from downtown Seattle.

Yes, it was a good idea, but let's face it: USA Today reported that for every company like SeaPort, there are 10 others that fail. Fuel prices, high labor costs and the whim of travelers affect all fledgling airlines.

SeaPort, however, is another story. What began as one round-trip a day turned into several air services between Eastern Oregon and the Oregon Coast to Portland, and Memphis to four small towns in Arkansas. Rob McKinney, CEO and president, said the company's commitment to exceptional customer service and Internet know-how has boosted the airline to annual sales of \$25 million.

It took a while, but eventually the company added e-ticketing, and passengers were able to use online sites such as Expedia and Travelocity to book tickets. SeaPort has built a reputation of providing personal customer service, sometimes holding a flight if a customer is running late. Online reviews left on Internet travel sites, as well as websites such as Yelp (<http://www.yelp.com>), are monitored closely.

"Service comes first," McKinney said. "SeaPort focuses on the fact that we are a service that just happens to be an airline. We understand that giving our guests an exceptional experience is what will bring them back as loyal customers.

"I believe many businesses would be better served by treating their customers as if they were guests in their home and realizing that they are a service first and foremost."

McKinney uses Google alerts (<http://www.google.com/alerts>) to keep track of everything that's said about SeaPort online.

"We have gotten several good reviews on Yelp," he said. "We use Google alerts to watch what's being said about us. We use Twitter to give away tickets and make other marketing announcements. "I can't say that Facebook has made a large difference yet, but we are still working on it. And we have recently started a blog as another way for our guests to contact us and comment on their experience."

Every traveler who has had a problem with SeaPort was been personally attended to. Every business's "Google" image is so important, McKinney said, most businesses are aware of it – or they should be – so that they can make sure their company's online image is as good as possible.

"Twitter is a double edge sword," he added. "If you don't tweet enough, people lose interest. If you send out too many tweet ads then people get turned off. Keeping your tweets relevant and appropriately timed is a challenge."

McKinney also believes in planning a public relations campaign in advance and sticking to it. While some businesses may be able to plan as far as a year in advance, there are so many fluctuations in the airline industry, he plans a 90-day advance schedule that takes up half his time, and spends the other half dealing with the unexpected.

“I am the face of the company,” he said. “I have to keep half of my time open to react to unexpected things such as the economy, service interruptions, weather events, government intervention and customer complaints. “Without that flexibility, I found it appeared as if I didn’t care about individual issues our guests had.”

Earthbound businesses can follow up an online sale with an email request for a review. Comment cards directing customers to a feedback site can be handed out with checks. Some businesses offer a chance for a prize on the receipt for people who visit a website to leave feedback. Facebook's "like" buttons are free to online businesses and provide free advertising on a customer’s news feed and wall.

For those reasons and more, a business’s website is an important tool. It’s money well spent in today’s Internet environment. I was able to help one restaurant client by creating a marketing plan that resulted in exposure on the Food Network, CNN and even the New York Times.

As a promoter of my businesses, I have had to become a web expert. Now I’m helping other small business owners. I’ll be glad to share some of the dos and don’ts of creating an effective business web site with you and the unique aspects of measuring customer acquisition cost for those customers your website attracts.

### **Remember only you can make business great!**

Ron Sturgeon, founder of [Mr. Mission Possible](#) small business consulting, combines over 35 years of entrepreneurship with an extensive resume in consulting, speaking, and business writing, with 3 books published and 2 more expected in 2011. A business owner since age 17, Ron sold his chain of salvage yards to Ford Motor Company in 1999, and his innovations in database-driven direct marketing have been profiled in [Inc. Magazine](#). After the repurchase of Greenleaf Auto Recyclers from Ford and sale to Schnitzer Industries, Ron is now owner of the [DFW Elite Auto](#) suite of businesses and a successful real estate investor.

As a [consultant](#) and [peer benchmarking](#) leader, Ron shares his expertise in strategic planning, capitalization, compensation, growing market share, and more in his signature plain-spoken style, providing field-proven, high-profit best practices well ahead of the business news curve.

Ron is a web expert, but he is also an expert in helping all types of small businesses become more successful and more profitable. He has helped owners in industries from restaurants to law firms with a wide variety of business issues, including sales, promotion, production, financial measures, business strategy, and planning for start ups. Whatever your unique challenges, Ron can help you.

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