# incahoots

## Making money while you sleep.

How many times have you heard that line? This seductive concept must be one of the most bandied-about mantras on the web. Who wouldn't warm to the idea of fulfilling on-line orders that have been racking up your in-box overnight?

Is this realistic? Yes and no. If you have a desirable product that's been intelligently marketed, flagged up in periodicals as well as word-of-mouth and deemed valuable, then it's a real possibility. If your website is an afterthought; a bolt-on that is untended and rarely updated, then unless your product is pretty special you're unlikely to be totting up those orders whilst drinking your morning orange juice.

It's vitally important to understand that online is not a bolt-on. It is another piece of real estate. If something goes wrong in-store, you are physically able to attend to and resolve issues. You usually get a second chance to rectify things. Rarely so online. *In-store you can be forgiven, online you are forgotten.*

Research by ForeSee Results 2010 indicate 'the gap between the best retail websites in the UK and the rest is huge and possibly widening. Whilst the year-on-year increase in satisfaction is small in the aggregate, individual retailers have seen big gains. The best and biggest online retailers are typically providing a much better online experience, and smaller retailers are falling further behind.'

So, how best to provide the online experience without an Apple or John Lewis budget? *By pushing it to the top of your priority list.* Too often web maintenance is left on the back burner - crammed in as an afterthought between other business agendas until something needs to be added-on, often with haphazard, piecemeal results.

It ideally needs scheduled monthly planning meetings with your designer and a strong PR campaign because there's nothing like intelligent marketing to drive traffic to your site. Consistent press coverage as well as sensible - not annoying - newsletter campaigns stacked with surprises, offers or enticements to encourage customers to visit takes up a surprising amount of thought, time, and commitment. It means utilising social networking because it is relevant - not because Twitter, blogging, Facebook and the host of others happen to be the buzzword of the moment. It means considering if you really have the time and resources to maintain and edit a content management system. Badly-written text, appalling grammar and spelling mistakes are, depressingly, becoming the industry standard.

*Your website is your worldwide calling card.*
You wouldn't dream of sending out a sales rep looking scruffy. Commit time and energy into researching the services of good marketing and design firms. The relationship with your designer will ideally be long-term, consistent, based on respect, and is open-minded to fresh ideas on both sides. It may sound like a cliché but if you can't communicate your vision to your designer, how can you hope to communicate with your customers? The client/designer dynamic is an often overlooked and under-rated relationship but one that should be a hugely rewarding experience. It really can be an exciting journey.

*The commitment to your website is not dissimilar to opening another shop.* It's expensive. It takes time to build. It needs careful planning. It needs to be fit for purpose. It needs regular updating and maintenance. It needs investment in the frontage, the décor, the point-of-sale material and keeping it looking fresh and spruced-up. Additionally, remember that every website is a prototype; new technology is near-impossible to keep up with.

Keep it simple. *Understated is not the same as underwhelming.* It's usually worthwhile to keep sites airy, allowing plenty of white space to let content 'breathe'. I wonder if clients realise that sometimes the more content that's put in, the less people will see what you want them to look at. The other way to go is Joseph Joseph (www.josephjoseph.com); a fresh and colourful kitchen utensils website. This is not a complicated site full of technical wizardry. It's a clean-design, easy-to-navigate online shop that is friendly and intuitive. Others that inspire: enticing Design Hotels, (www.designhotels.com), online luxury via Net-a-Porter (www.net-a-porter.com), super-cool Paul Smith (www.paulsmith.co.uk), jolly and approachable Pedlars (www.pedlars.co.uk) and for astonishing brand confidence, Hermes's new playful and witty site (www.hermes.com).

Because you aren't there to deal directly with customers, the look of it and the user experience should ideally mirror your vision for your brand as well as your retail space. Your audience may not be able to touch your product. But they can see it. Therefore it makes sense to invest in top-quality photography wherever possible. It is astonishing how often clients supply shoddy images that they'd never consider using anywhere else.

Everyone knows that set photography is a major investment but most top manufacturers supply excellent room set photographs. For individual items there are many competitively priced pack shot or single-product photography companies who will shoot batches on white backgrounds that work beautifully either as main images or in the shopping section of all websites. Unless you are experienced with setting up professional lighting it's advisable to resist the temptation to take them yourself.

It may seem obvious but unlike the magazine you're reading right now, web pages tend to be horizontal. You can read a web page vertically on an iPad or your phone but in the main it will be viewed on a laptop or desktop computer. So yes, you can get plenty of content in but reading on a screen is not the same as reading print. The text is backlit and can be surprisingly tiring to view. Resist the urge to fill every nook and cranny with masses of copy. If a customer picks up an item in a shop there is usually a brief description and pricing information. Why should it be any different online? Conversely, imagery can look dazzling on a screen. Think about your holiday photos. After downloading to one's pc from a digital camera they practically 'zing' off the screen. Then one rummages around for that pack of glossy paper that came with the printer and there is the excitement of watching them crunching their way out. Except the images often end up looking a bit dark, a bit drab, a bit dull. So consider capitalising on all that light flooding the screen and allow vibrant photography to sell the product.

Although these are simplified pointers to the myriad of permutations en route to the holy grail of successful online retailing, they are issues that are often over-looked. They might even ease the path to every e-retailer's favourite dream: waking up to a full shopping basket. Which in turn ensures everyone gets a good night's sleep.