Best Practices for Using Online Images to Turn Browsers into Buyers

Over the course of more than a year of research for my book *Cashing in with Content: How innovative marketers use digital information to turn browsers into buyers* I looked at least 1000 sites and interviewed dozens of marketing people about the way they build their sites to be successful. An important lesson is that effective content is not limited to words. Innovative marketers make use of non-text content, such as cartoons, charts, graphs, audio feeds and video clips, to inform and entertain site visitors.

In particular, photographs play an important role for many successful Web sites. For example, check out CARE USA at www.careusa.org where many beautiful photos taken by its team of staff photographers around the world help communicate the value of the CARE USA humanitarian projects to donors. In the B2B world, Weyerhaeuser makes terrific use of images on its site at www.weyerhaeuser.com. Both the CARE USA site and the Weyerhaeuser site are profiled as case studies in my book as are other sites that use images to turn browsers into buyers.

Here are best practice ideas for using images to turn browsers into buyers on your site:

Best Practice # 1 > Avoid generic "stock" images
Photographs are powerful content when the images are recognizably an integrated component of the Web site. However, generic "stock" photographs may actually have a negative effect. Neither you nor your users are generic. Too often, marketing people (many are influenced by advertising agencies) fall back on stock photographs to "add visual interest" instead of being sufficiently concerned that the image have meaning in the context of the other (written) content. Think carefully before you put a stock photo on your site. Consider the alternatives to a non-descript image pulled from a clip art catalog or a photo library.

Best Practice # 2 > Use real photos and other images
If you're all excited about using a shot of people in your site, bring in a skilled photographer and shoot photos of your product, management, staff, or customers. Rather than a generic meeting shot from a stock photo house, snap a photo at your next management meeting and use it on your site. You could even add a caption including people's names and titles. This technique personalizes your organization.

Best Practice # 3 > Use images to tell a story
Images, graphs, diagrams, and illustrations help tell your organization's story. When used as a component of an overall content strategy, images enhance and add context to text-based information. Particularly in complex business-to-business applications a chart or product diagram adds to more complete understanding. In virtually any marketplace, charts, graphs, and especially original informative photos help visitors to grasp what you're selling making them more likely to buy.

Best Practice # 4 > Avoid distracting Flash Video introduction pages
While photos, charts, graphs, and other non-text content make great additions to any site, be wary of very large image sizes and using distracting multimedia content like Flash Video. Visitors want to access content quickly, they want sites that load fast, and they don't want to be distracted from the information they seek. A number of marketers I interviewed mentioned that they specifically avoid excessive use of overbearing technologies and images that would have diminished the value of the actual content. Don't be tempted to include something that's so distracting that you need a "skip" button – better to just skip it all together.