

How effective is your website?

By Randall Decoteau

Twenty-five years ago I remember peering into a DOS database containing inventory for the company I worked for, my face lit by the hard-to-see acid green letters in front of me. The program was painfully slow and hopelessly inaccurate, but at the time we thought we were at the head of the curve. Today, hardly a business survives without a website, e-mail, shopping cart, web updates, newsletters and a host of other applications for the Internet. We've asked several antiques businesses to answer a few questions in order to gain insight into just how far we've come.

Northeast: Tell us about your website. How important is this marketing tool to your overall business?

RON KORMAN: We have had our website for over 15 years at this point. It is very important to our business and has proved to be even more so during this challenging business climate. We have not been doing shows for about 20 years so this is a very good way for us to get our newly found merchandise into the eyes and hopefully the hands of our longtime and newer collectors from all over the country. Compared to other forms of advertising, a website is quite inexpensive and the results are immediate. Then there are also the unexpected e-mails that you get from people who have just found the site, fell in love with it, and want to find out more about the items. Yesterday I got an e-mail from the set decoration coordinator of the new Twilight movie "Breaking Dawn" asking about all the old signs that we have for sale. They wanted them for the next movie, and so the negotiations start. It is always exciting to hear from new clients.

RUSS GOLDBERGER: Our website is an important part of our marketing presence. We have offered a site for over 10 years. I guess we were one of the pioneers among antique dealers. The site has evolved to become the most important way collectors locate us (others include shows, ads and gallery visits).

DREW MILLER: We are currently in development of a new website in order to deliver a better overall user experience in regards to functionality, design and search engine optimization. Within our business and the competition we face, we have found that we need to stay as relevant as possible and use whatever means necessary to market our website by having our print, radio and television ads correlate with our website and the information people can find there.

Northeast: Did you use a website designer? How did you decide on the initial design for your site?

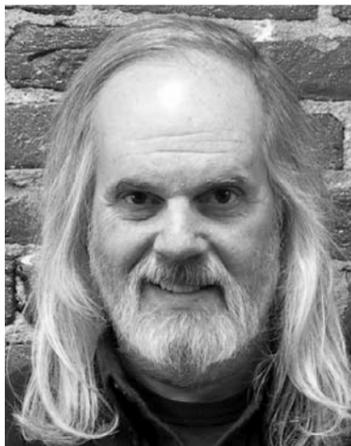
RUSS GOLDBERGER: Our site has continually evolved; it is still a work in progress. We have gone through a number of significant evolutions from a static site which supported our presence to a listing of antique and decoy offerings (call or e-mail us if interested), to a destination site with lots of background information for new and established collectors, a reference book resource, helpful links to other relevant sites, daily updates as new material is added or sold, a secure shopping cart for credit card purchases, etc. We outlined the site objects, components and desired features and we work closely with Lisa Freeman in Ipswich, Mass., who does our design work and implementation. She is terrific!

DREW MILLER: I am the website designer and it was my job to develop a website that not only looked good but was also appropriate for our demographics. The overall design was created to reflect the experience of our shows and the excitement of attending Scott Antiques Markets. And of course, a good website should always be a work in progress.

RON KORMAN: Actually my friend Vicki Waasdorp had been trying to get me to have a website for a long time and I was very resistant to the idea. Then one day she called me and told me to stop by her house because she had something for me to see. When I got there she showed me what is now and



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Ron Korman, Muleskinner, 5548 Main St, Williamsville, NY 14221, 716-633-4077, www.muleskinnerantiques.com



Drew Miller, The Scott Antiques Markets, P.O. Box 60, Bremen, OH 43107, 740-569-4112, www.scottantiquemarket.com

has always been the website which she designed, and I was very impressed. She explained how it all worked and showed me all the things that we could do with it, and I was sold. So, I have to give her all the credit for talking me into it and for designing the whole thing.

Northeast: Do you use somebody for troubleshooting and technical advice? Why or why not?

DREW MILLER: Yes, I have various friends and colleagues that I sometimes go to when I have a question or need help with a certain issue. Two heads are often better than one when confronted with the technical aspects of website design. There is far more behind a beautiful website than attractive photos and informative text.

RON KORMAN: Vicki Waasdorp is still the person that takes care of the site for us; I do all the photography, but she does the rest including the troubleshooting.

RUSS GOLDBERGER: Beyond Lisa, we also work closely with a database specialist because our site is interrelated with our database. We have a simple system set up where, as inventory comes in, it is photographed, cataloged and immediately uploaded to our website. The whole process takes perhaps 10 minutes per item. However, we offer as many as 300 items at a time, so the initial investment took a lot of effort. Maintenance like daily updates is fairly simple.

Northeast: What is the primary function of your website; e.g. is it a selling tool? How often do you update its contents?

RON KORMAN: The primary function of our website is to showcase our merchandise and present items for sale to the public. The site allows us to show many people color photos of all the things that we have for sale. We update our website about every two to four weeks or whenever we get 10 to 20 new things in at the shop.

DREW MILLER: Our website functions on multiple levels. We provide information to the public for coupon deals, online radio details, registration and much more. Each facet of the site brings more people to the venues we host. We are constantly updating our information to better serve anyone who visits the website.

RUSS GOLDBERGER: I think I've covered this question already.

Northeast: Do you think the Internet will become more or less important as time passes?

DREW MILLER: There is no doubt that the Internet will only become more important as time goes on. Advances in technology are happening every day. I just read that Google is

already able to map out the entire lives of people just through the information it has gathered from users throughout the years.

RUSS GOLDBERGER: The Internet is here to stay, but it will never totally replace hands-on action in the antiques business. We devote a lot of effort to providing potential customers with collecting resource information and background about ourselves. We offer complete descriptions with professional quality photographs and an ironclad guarantee. We even provide a trade-in policy which kicks in two years after purchase on decoys, as spelled out on our site. All of this is designed to assure potential customers that they can feel confident dealing with us, and it works. Recently, a new collector in Alabama bought four items.

RON KORMAN: We have been extremely happy with the results achieved by our website and believe that the Internet will become even more important as time passes.

Northeast: How happy are you with the results achieved through your website?

RUSS GOLDBERGER: Websites provide an alternate way to shop for those who live relatively near us or like the convenience of shopping at all hours at home. However, it is essential for those who live more remotely or are less committed to collecting and can't devote the effort to visit shows or galleries. Internet marketing will only grow in importance to the antique trade as committed and potential collectors become more familiar and comfortable with it. We are embarking on a costly upgrade to our website which you will see in mid-2011 bringing new features, more thorough descriptions, more and larger photographs, etc. The Internet and RJG Antiques are partners for the long haul.

DREW MILLER: To date we are very excited about our new website and how much we have streamlined the ability to find the information our customers seek most. It's been a long process with lots of research and concepts, but I think we have found the perfect formula.

RON KORMAN: We have a very active and ever changing website at this point. There are over 1,000 people on our emailing list and we constantly keep them posted as to our new acquisitions. The one complaint that we do receive from time to time is that we don't put the prices on the things on our site. We do this for one reason. We like to have direct contact with all our customers and potential customers, and having them request prices via e-mail or telephone allows us to interact. I think that keeping the business personal is still very important, especially in this business, and especially with any new customers who are learning. We love to talk about our stuff!

*We've TURNED THE PAGE
with our online edition.*

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