

What is Web 2.0 and how can it help your website?

A he second wave of the Internet has arrived and it brings with it new opportunities. Retailers who can leverage the collective intelligence of the crowd and the tools they use will find many ways to build new paths to their business.

How you choose to participate depends largely on whether you want to contribute to the abundance of consumer generated content, or by building tools that allow others to generate content on your website. The wine industry already has its Web 2.0 poster child in Gary Vaynerchuk of Wine Library; whether you choose to follow Gary's "in your face" style or take a more conservative approach should be consistent with how you communicate with your customers.

The following is a summary of the main social media tools that make up Web 2.0 to help you decide where the opportunities lie for you business.

Social Bookmarking: these sites help you organize and share links to interesting sites. Creating an account with links to your own site can help if you also include other wine-related links that customers might enjoy. There is some debate about the value of these links for improving your search engine placement; it is likely however that they will at least follow the link for discovery purposes. Examples of popular bookmarking sites are Del.icio.us, Furl, Diigo, and StumbleUpon.

Squidoo: is a platform for building a single page or "lens" to promote something you are passionate about. There are thousands of lenses built for the purpose of promoting businesses that sell products. The key to a successful lens is writing something that potential customers will want to tell others about. Despite recent news that Google has downgraded the impact of Squidoo in its results, a simple test yielded a prominent search results after only 4 days.

Weblogs: by now this phenomenon has caught everyone's attention, however many blogs have been started that didn't amount to much. A good blog takes effort and requires someone who can maintain an informative and well written conversation. Blogs do well with search engines and can generate a loyal following that supports your business. Podcasts and online videos are variations on this theme where media files replace the written word.

Bookmarking tags: on most blogs you will see small icons for the popular bookmarking sites as a reminder to spread the word about a page you like. Why not add these icons to your site where you think customers might find something they want to share.

RSS feeds: Really Simple Syndication is the name of a formatting tool that allows users to combine elements from several websites into a personal landing page. Why not feed your customers a list of New Arrivals as they become available on your website?

User Generated Reviews: allowing customers to rate and comment on your products is an approach famously championed by Amazon.com. Some stores have complained about the effort involved in preventing abuse which requires either monitoring every post or trusting your audience to report problems.

As with most new web projects it probably pays to dip your toe in the water first to decide how much ongoing effort you can sustain. Why not try building a lens on Squidoo about a wine region you are excited about, and then include your lens on a few bookmarking sites. Experimenting these new social tools can be rewarding, if time consuming, but over time you might find that others have also begun building new paths to your business.

To learn more about how the Beverage Network can help with a website for you store, contact Ian Griffith at (212) 571-3232, or visit www.bevnetwork.com/retailweb.