

Multichannel Selling: How a Gorgeous Email Newsletter Grows Catalog, Web, and Store Sales

QUESTION: Modern furniture seller Design Within Reach (DWR.com) publishes one of the most beautiful email newsletters in the world. **But does great graphic design and non-sales related contents really translate into hard sales?** This case study is DWR.com's notes on how to translate your brand image from **print materials** - such as a direct mail catalog - to **online**.

CHALLENGE: When Rob Forbes founded Design Within Reach (DWR) in 1999, it must have been about the only new San Francisco based company that year that wasn't a dot com. In fact, the company didn't even have a web site.

Instead, Forbes started the old fashioned way-with a **printed direct mail catalog**.

The response was overwhelming. **Sales started coming in**, but so did questions. Brian Lynch, DWR's Online Producer, says, "One of the most popular questions was **'Your catalog is great-where's your web site?'** Of course we'd been meant to do a web site someday, it was at the back of our minds. But this response made us realize, ok we NOW need to put something together online that's just as strong as the catalog." That's "now" as in within just a couple of months.

CAMPAIGN: In the rush of getting the initial site up quickly, everything couldn't be perfect all at once. So, Lynch decided to focus his energy on getting the three most critical factors right from the start:

- *Critical Factor #1: A Company-Wide Design Esthetic*

Graphic design is critically important both because DWR is marketing to a very **visually oriented audience (decorators, architects, and their clients)**, and because a strong design esthetic can be of enormous aid in branding.

Instead of creating the web site in a vacuum, Lynch and his team tried to match design elements and general esthetics from the catalog as closely as possible. This doesn't mean they simply copied catalog pages.

In fact Lynch says of catalogs that published duplicate electronic versions of their print catalog, "That's sad. It's a real missed opportunity. **Paper and Web are two different mediums**. You can do so much more with a site than you can do in a catalog -**up-sell, suggest other products, show more photographs, offer more items**.")

Lynch chose to duplicate a series of **design elements** from the catalog -including sans serif typefaces, white space, ultra thin black lines as separators, and red boxes with white reverse type that match the logo while building an entirely interactive site. The elements combine to form a feeling of clean lines and modernity that matches the products DWR sells. “It’s a whole uncluttered feel.”

The site in particular, stands out from other retail e-sites because there’s so much white space. Lynch says, “I read all these articles saying white space doesn’t work online. Customers don’t like it, don’t find it appealing, blah, blah, blah.”

Luckily the articles were wrong. “One of the most frequent esthetic compliments we get is people like that white space, because the less white space, the more clutter there is. When you get to a product page, we want you to see that product, focus on the details of that product, and the story behind that product.”

This **simplicity** of graphic design was part of the site’s interactive design esthetic. Pictures and graphics are configured so they don’t slow page load time. There’s no Flash or audio or anything fancy that might slow site speed. The site is clean and fast.

- *Critical Factor #2: Basic Navigation to Grow*

Lynch knew that once launched, the site would continue to grow and evolve dramatically over time. But he absolutely didn’t want to do an all new site re-launch every 18 months (as was once recommended) to upgrade to a new look and/or new navigation.

He explains, “We didn’t want to switch things around. Customers want **consistency with evolution**. It’s a real challenge to change it without jarring or confusing customers.”

So, in addition to a clearly branded design esthetic, the Web team agreed to a basic navigation skeleton and framework from day one, which has not changed despite the addition of hundreds more products. The navigation bars and the layout have remained substantially the same. Additional bells and whistles, such as the recently launched option to view products in different colors, are added in as non-disruptively as possible.

- *Critical Factor #3: Building a **Brand Relationship**, Not Just **Sales***

Although DWR definitely wanted to make immediate sales online, the Web team had the concurrent goal to establish a branded, ongoing relationship with their marketplace.

Lynch explains, “We’re trying to create an **experience** that’s more than just a **shallow interaction**. We want to share with you why we’re selling this product and the **stories** behind this product, not just click here, add this to your cart, you’re out the door, goodbye.”

DWR’s site accomplishes this in two ways:

- A home page that focuses more on establishing credibility (with a gorgeous photo, magazine quotes, and famous customer names) and offering super-easy-to-use navigation, than on pushing products.
- An editorial section called “Designers” featuring biographies of dozens of the designers whose products are offered. This is the type of information you might expect to find in a coffee-table book or design school textbook than in an e-retail site.

Three months after the site launched, the DWR Web team took the next logical step and started a **companion email newsletter**. The newsletter’s importance in growing a branded, educational relationship with visitors and customers is obvious from the minute you visit DWR’s home page, where a newsletter opt-in box is first -and-foremost in the top central spot.

This means highly valuable screen real estate is devoted to something most e-retailers hide on the lower left corner of their navigation bar, or don’t even have on the home page at all.

Initially the newsletter was published in **text-only** because the Web team was too busy with site basics to focus on it. However the minute they had the chance, about six months later, they upgraded to **HTML**.

Newsletter design esthetics again match both the catalog and site very closely. Anyone who sees one would recognize the visual branding of the others instantly. The newsletter’s philosophy is also recognizably DWR’s. **Instead of focusing on product offers, the newsletter features editorial.**

In fact, it feels as though an upscale design magazine just emailed you a page of their best editorial, packed with high quality photos and links back to more fascinating stuff online.

Creating this high -quality editorial isn’t easy. Lynch admits, “It’s one of the biggest projects we have in the marketing department. It takes an immense amount of time. It’s not just ’ok we’re going to sell a product now so pull the copy we wrote six months ago and stick it in there.”

Luckily Founder Rob Forbes is able to help out. Lynch says, “He travels to meet with top designers all over the world, and he’s able to interview

them and takes digital photographs left and right.” Whenever Forbes gets back from a road trip, his marketers grab his digital camera and interview notes as fodder for future issues. “We’ll download 200 pictures he’s taken and find the ones we want to use.”

RESULTS: DWR is profitable (despite the recession) and 40%

... of total company sales are currently made online. That doesn’t mean these sales are 100% Web generated. DWR’s sales channels (which now include two brick and mortar retail stores) are all interdependent.

DWR is truly a multichannel retailer with a single branded message. You can order a catalog from the site. You can check out the site from an iMac terminal prominently located in the retail stores. Both the site and catalog encourage you to call a toll -free number if you have any questions or simply prefer ordering by phone. You can email customer service directly from then site or the newsletter.

Although the Web is the “most constant” sales channel, Lynch says he can see a definite “spike” in online sales whenever the catalog is mailed. There’s also a definite bump whenever the email newsletter goes out.

To take advantage of this bump, DWR does something clever we haven’t noticed anywhere else. Instead of sending out a bland welcome message to new opt-ins and then making them wait for the next issue to be published, the email system sends them a copy of the latest issue immediately.

Last year, enough sales were driven from the email newsletter that DWR changed its frequency from twice monthly to weekly. The team watched results carefully, worried they might see a corresponding rise in unsubscribes or lowered click through rates. No such thing happened.

In fact, subscriptions increased 300%. Lynch says happily, “We actually saw an increase in people forwarding the newsletter to other people! Customers seem to like getting it every week.”

Certainly the feedback is tremendous, “We send it on Wednesdays because it’s the middle of the week, but we get messages saying ‘I love your newsletter. I spend my Saturday mornings with a cup of coffee reading your newsletter.’”

Although DWR only ships to the US and Canada, the newsletter’s popularity overseas may serve as a barometer for potential corporate expansion. Lynch says, “It’s known all around the world. Our founder was walking down the street in Paris, and there it was, printed out and displayed in a shop window.”