

## The Right Technology Can Take Your Business to the Next Level

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*One of the best things about being a business owner in 2010 is that we have access to more affordable, easy-to-use technology than ever before.*

There are a lot of challenges to being a business owner these days. But there's also an upside to owning a business in 2010: namely, affordable and easy-to-use technology. In the last several months I've talked to several technology companies about what they're doing to help entrepreneurs.

A few weeks ago IBM launched a Center of Competency (CoC) to help retailers reduce costs and inefficiencies, develop products, accelerate their go-to-market activities, and "better understand, track, and respond to consumers." In conjunction with the CoC launch, IBM released a survey of over 32,000 global consumers that indicates the recession has produced smarter, more demanding consumers.

Those surveyed said they want retailers to deliver "customized promotions" as well as provide guarantees that the products they want are available. Sixty-one percent of respondents said they would spend more money with the business that could provide these two things.

There were some other interesting findings in the survey that small retailers should pay attention to:

- 79 percent of those surveyed want the option to print coupons directly from a store's website.
- 75 percent want to find a store's location by using their mobile phones.
- 66 percent want to know what products are in stock before they visit a store.
- 79 percent are willing to work with companies to help design new products or services "that better meet their personal needs."

Other tech solutions are aimed at helping you to run your business more efficiently. Many business owners have problems trying to e-mail large files, only to discover their computer servers couldn't handle the file or the person they were sending it to never received it. I had this exact experience a few weeks ago trying to send a large audio file, until someone recommended that I use the site YouSendIt.com. Coincidentally, a week later I was asked to be a judge for a contest held by YouSendIt, a company that enables you to securely send, receive, and track large digital files. (The contest winners used the service to send images of premature babies' eyes for screening by physicians, in order to see if surgery was needed to save their sight.)

The service, like many a successful entrepreneurial venture, was born out of personal experience. Founder and CTO Ranjith Kumaran frequently found himself having to personally drop off disks containing large amounts of data. He recognized an unmet business need and knew there had to be a

better way to send files back and forth. YouSendIt now offers its more than 10 million users several different levels of service and price points, one of which is specifically targeted to small business owners.

Since Kumaran is an entrepreneur himself and frequently helps new startups and other online companies, he offered to share some of the "unsung Web sites and tools" he's found particularly helpful.

For Web marketing and analytics:

crazyegg.com: helps you to visually determine where users are clicking on your Web pages.

tynt.com: drives traffic back to your site when your content is copied.

For customer feedback:

uservice.com: helps you to collect crowd-source ideas from your customers and users.

survey.io: helps with customer development.

Several months ago I spoke with Jeff Stiles, the senior VP of Small-Medium Enterprise Marketing at SAP, who said it was essential that small and mid-sized businesses "embrace new technologies." Stiles acknowledged that the recession forced a lot of businesses to "retrench," but reminds business owners that if you don't invest, you can't grow. It's particularly important, Stiles says, to be aware of when you start outgrowing your current tech solutions. Some warning signs he suggests you look for:

- It's harder to manage inventory.
- You've opened new sales channels.
- You've formed new partnerships.
- You've landed a big customer that demands more sophisticated systems.

Many tech companies now understand that most small businesses don't have full-time IT personnel and have started offering more "plug and play" solutions. Over at Microsoft's Small Business Center and Business Resource Center, the company is emphasizing how small businesses can save money and scale up easily and affordably by accessing services "in the cloud" and by using virtualized servers. You don't need a full-time IT employee to implement these solutions. (Full disclosure: Microsoft is a client of mine.)

This is a great time to invest in technology. Not only are tech companies developing new solutions designed especially for SMBs, but these products are scalable and the prices are affordable. Investing in technology will make your business and your employees more productive, efficient, and profitable.

Hopefully, investing a little now will enable you to reap big rewards down the road.