

# THE CYBERSPACE RACE

Why the future of apparel ordering is online and what industry suppliers are doing to beef up their Web offerings to distributors.

*By Dave Vagnoni*



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**h**ryan Thompson is a professional multi-tasker. He works days, nights and weekends growing his promotional products business, while still fitting in time for his other job. And that other job is no ordinary thing. "I can't afford any false starts in my life," Thompson says understatedly. When he's not selling ad specialties, Thompson is guiding airplanes, working as an air traffic controller at O'Hare Airport in Chicago. "Obviously, time is important to me," he says in a deadpan tone.

Time is also important to his clients, which is why Thompson takes advantage of another useful skill. He designs Web sites. "I'm self-taught," he says. "I used to put together grass-

## Room for Improvement

In general, smaller distributor owners have few complaints about apparel supplier Web sites. But large industry distributors have some suggestions for how these online outlets could be more applicable to their needs. Here are three ways that distributors believe apparel supplier Web sites could be more effective.

**1) Product Descriptions** – Some distributors feel apparel suppliers have cut copy to fit more products on a screen or Web page. Distributors want more detailed product information – the details are what their clients ultimately are interested in.

**2) Back Images** – Distributors would like to see images of the backs of apparel in creating virtual samples. They say it would help them give clients a complete picture of a product. While the front of a shirt or jacket is what many see first, buyers of promotional apparel need to have a feel for a garment's complete look.

**3) Integration** – Large distributors don't need suppliers to build them Web sites. They want specific information electronically sent to them. "We are looking for ways for them to help us flatten the supply chain, such that our end-buyers have more of an 'Amazon' experience," says Dawn Olds, director of operations at Halo/Lee Wayne (*asi/356000*). "Electronic information regarding order status and shipping information, sent automatically to us when status changes and in a way we can integrate with our systems, is ideal." – DV

**"I like fast, reliable, clean Web sites. I want to maximize the time of my customers and not waste their time. I expect the same from vendors."**

– BRYAN THOMPSON, FULL MOON RISING INC. (*asi/199736*)

roots newsletters and then went online."

When he started his distributor company, Full Moon Rising Inc. (*asi/199736*), Thompson built a main site. Soon after that, he began creating a suite of Web stores for his clients. "The idea was to make access easier for clients and it's worked out pretty well for us," Thompson says.

Yes, it has. FMR has doubled its sales every year since it was established in 2004. Even in a staggering economy, Thompson continues to gain clients, mostly through the Web. "People are using their computers, even the elderly," he says. "They're finding me online. I can tell by their voices when they do call, some of them, they're in their 70s."

Armed with graphic design experience, and strapped with a heavier schedule than most, Thompson is an ideal distributor to ask about an ever-evolving and frequently-discussed industry topic: online ordering of apparel. Like many salespeople, doing business on the Web allows Thompson the convenience he needs to be successful. "I like fast, reliable, clean Web sites," he says. "I want to maximize the time of my customers and not waste their time. I expect the same from vendors."

Thompson is one of several distributors *Counselor* called on to explain what features they value most about apparel supplier sites. Some of the most appreciated points are sophisticated, like fancy and targeted marketing tools. Others are more basic, like 24/7 information access. No matter, all apparel suppliers are facing a never-ending

cyberspace race to provide the most desirable and practical online services, especially to smaller distributors that lack large sale forces and in-house creative departments.

Here, we look at the different capabilities that apparel suppliers have online, and how distributors are taking advantage of them.

### Why Web Sites Matter

Spurred by constant feedback from distributors like Thompson, apparel suppliers have spent thousands of hours and millions of dollars redesigning and upgrading their Web sites. For example, Broder Bros. Co. (*asi/42099*), Vantage Apparel (*asi/93390*) and River's End Trading Company (*asi/82588*) have finished major Web site overhauls in the last two years. Ash City (*asi/37127*) and Bodek and Rhodes (*asi/40788*) redesigned their sites within the last year. SanMar (*asi/84863*) committed to a Web site relaunch after the 2008 holiday rush.

The payoff has already been noticeable. River's End has seen Web sales increase 15% since it recreated its Web site. Also, a full 50% of Broder's orders are now placed online, accounting for 43% of sales. A year ago, only 40% of orders were made on Broder's Web site.

"We took a lot of time researching, talking to customers and studying other sites," says Girisha Chandraraj, vice president of marketing at Broder. "We feel like we have the best B-to-B site, built on customer behavior and customer service experience."

Distributors say the most attention-grabbing Web sites aren't the ones with catchy graphics or colorful animation. Actually, the sites most complimented are those that are simple and streamlined for time and energy savings. "Sites that are too flashy can be distracting," Thompson says. "Sometimes, designers want to show off a new technique they just learned."

Ash City and River's End got exceptionally high marks from distributors *Counselor* spoke to for designing clear and understandable sites. "We don't have an overwhelming amount of information on our site," says Lori Anderson, River's End marketing manager. "We hear it's easy to find the right brand and the right products."

**Personalized Accounts and Search Engines**

The most trusted apparel supplier Web sites offer user-specific online accounts. After registering with a login and password, a customer has immediate access to a variety of tabs, portals and charts. As purchases are made over time, Web sites remember order history and patterns.

Broder gives account holders numerous online product search tools, enhanced by a tutorial for beginners. The Express Order option allows customers to enter a style number and be given instant product information, including available colors. A buyer can order up to eight different sizes, in any quantity, with updated price lists highlighted on the screen. At any time, a customer can access a checkout window,

which provides an order breakdown and shipping options. "We want to make our site so good that customers can get everything they need here," says Chandraraj.

Broder customers can also search for products by category and brand or by browsing through an online catalog. Broder provides comprehensive size charts as well that include details on two dozen clothing manufacturers.

Besides Broder, distributors give high marks to SanMar for its Web site search tools. On this site, a first-time user needs to download software before ordering. Once the plug-in is installed, users can search based on several criteria, including price range. Chad Stokes, owner of Utah-based 801 Promos (*asi/186309*), touts SanMar as having an especially useful site.

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**“We want our site to think like our customers think. The site should link to wherever they live and give info that’s relevant to them.”**

— LEE STROM, SANMAR (ASI/84863)

“SanMar’s site is excellent,” Stokes says. “Having a clothing-specific site is critical. A good supplier will have order look-up and tracking history online. They have amazing turnaround time, too. Talking to customer service is so outdated.”

### Real-Time Inventory

Distributors widely agree that providing real-time inventory is the greatest online tool currently available. Suppliers know it. An increasing number of real-time systems, including the one employed by SanMar, will even automatically locate the warehouse closest to a distributor with the amount of product requested. Instant information and coordinated shipping are tied together. Some sites can also estimate

when a product will be restocked.

“We want our site to think like our customers think,” says Lee Strom, senior marketing manager at SanMar. “The site should link to wherever they live and give info that’s relevant to them.”

It’s a sentiment that distributors appreciate. “It may be 10 o’clock at night and I want to place an order or confirm stock,” Thomson says. “I don’t want to guess. I want to lock it in.”

Of course, Web site speeds and download times are also key factors in convenience. Improvements are constantly being made. For example, despite a considerable increase in recent daily Web traffic, Bodek and Rhodes’ site is able to update inventory every 15 seconds. “When you’re with a

client on the phone or in person, it’s about your word,” says Jean Obad, owner of Diamond Stitch Embroidery (*asi/180213*). “It’s a huge advantage to know availability and to know if a shirt has been discontinued. To be able to recommend a product and size is nice.”

Strom admits his company’s site wasn’t always the fastest, but upgrades have made a significant difference. “Now, our site is notoriously fast,” Strom says. “Customers are able to cruise through our site and quickly satisfy their needs.”

As part of its Web site upgrades, River’s End implemented a new software system to provide interactive real-time information to customers. Account holders can view detailed product descriptions, merchandise in stock, invoices and close-out specials. “It’s a great benefit to our customers if they can log on to a generic Web site while sitting with their customer and pull up products and inventory availability right on the spot,” says Anderson of River’s End. “Distributors have to be more efficient, so as suppliers we need to make sure they have quick access to information.”

**Payment Options**

Most distributors have accounts set up with apparel suppliers with agreed-upon net terms. But with online ordering becoming more common, more distributors are considering using credit cards to gain points for travel or other purchases, like office furniture. "I'm using a credit card more often," says Thompson. "I like to fly first class."

Before a distributor makes the switch to credit cards, though, be warned that some suppliers charge an extra 3% for credit card purchases. Among larger apparel suppliers, Ash City is one that does not tack on upfront credit card fees.

"We continue to get great feedback about our site," says Chris Clark, vice president of sales at Ash City. "We want the

online ordering experience to be the best it can be for our customers. Good payment options are part of that. We don't charge additional fees."

**Marketing Tools**

Apparel suppliers have committed significant online resources to marketing – especially providing marketing help to their distributor clients. The viewpoint: Suppliers are trying to create distributor loyalty by doing some of their marketing work for them. Indeed, apparel supplier Web sites allow distributors to advertise with interactive e-catalogs and pricelists, to design flyers and Web sites and to order embroidery.

Vantage offers trend reports, decorative information and a variety of sample

kits. SanMar produces survey tools as well as product videos that give distributors the option to personalize with a message at the end of the demo. Broder has a variety of marketing options available to its distributors online. And Ash City just added new marketing features, including a "make your own movie" section that can be customized with logos. Customers can choose from among six short movie clips that each spotlight a different type of performance apparel. The clips can be personalized and e-mailed to clients. In one clip, an unsuspecting football player is hit by a man in an advertised bonded fleece. The caption reads: "This season's big hit."

To supplement its marketing features, the company is adding to its customer ser-

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vice staff and inside sales team. “We’re about to move into our brand new world headquarters and we want to be pounding the pavement as much as possible,” says Clark.

Smaller distributors expect to benefit the most from upgraded marketing tools. Dan Kaufman, president of DKG Promotions (*asi/173954*), believes Bodek and Rhodes maintains one of the most comprehensive Web sites among apparel suppliers. But he was more impressed when he took a closer look at recent updates. “I hadn’t looked at their marketing tools in a while,” Kaufman says. “I’d definitely consider using them now.”

Bodek refreshes its site with new features about every two months, with tips for online, print and showroom displays. Months before the new year, the site provided a section that gave customers a sneak peek at upcoming products for 2009. “We’re finding that our revenue online is increasing,” says Marc Held, national sales manager at Bodek. “Our site is very accurate with sizing instructions and pricing and our customized tools are great.”

Thompson is one distributor who uses

as many online marketing materials as possible. “Ones that we can brand with our company info are also great,” he says. “Most of the bigger sites offer this on their catalogs.”

### Artwork and Virtual Samples

As image resolution improves on apparel supplier sites, logo transferring is gradually gaining popularity. More and more sites now offer users the option to upload and save artwork and then essentially paste it digitally on an online silhouette. These virtual samples can be e-mailed to clients as part of a highly effective sales presentation.

Realizing the desire for this technology, Vantage as well as Bodek and Rhodes are testing ways to enhance logo features. Both companies expect to apply the upgrades to their sites early this year.

“It used to be that it would take hours for anybody to produce a virtual sample,” says Gina Barreca, marketing director at Vantage. “We continue to develop tools that are easy and that control quality and output.”

Ash City gives customers a six-step

outline for developing virtual samples. After uploading an image, customers can move and modify logos then send the image to clients. Broder even goes so far as to supply customers with a DVD of product images. There are also options to create virtual samples on Broder’s product detail pages.

But despite suppliers’ efforts, many distributors still prefer to create virtual samples in-house, trusting their own skills or the talents of their design staff. “This is the digital era and we’re trying to be more eco-conscious, but we like to do samples internally,” says Memo Kahan, president of *Counselor* Top 40 distributor PromoShop (*asi/300446*). “We think it’s more fluid and speeds up the sale.”

Michael Kaufman, owner of Wear It’s At (*asi/356021*), understands that virtual samples can save time, but he prefers his clients to see an actual sample instead of one online. “I like clients to be able to feel the material of a shirt and see the collar and buttons to make sure it’s OK,” he says. “You can’t do that with a virtual sample.” ○

*Dave Vagnoni is a staff writer for Counselor.*