



Virtual Malls

Expanding into Global Markets

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Virtual Mall is an *Internet site* that looks and functions like a shopping mall or department store. It is an online “one stop” destination to buy a variety of goods and services. Instead of walking in stores as you would in a physical setting, you simply click on the store that you wish to enter and a Web page appears featuring the store’s merchandise. When you are ready to leave the store, return to the home page and click on another store and continue shopping.

Since the virtual mall concept is relatively new, many different mall types are being tested. Some sites have shared shopping carts and offer one simple check out.

The virtual mall has many advantages to the shopper:

- Reduces travel time for shoppers
- Reduces shopping time for shoppers
- Allows shoppers to shop 24/7
- Online search tools help locate items quickly
- Consumers may be able to buy at lower prices

The virtual mall has advantages to the entrepreneur and community:

- Expands customer base of brick and mortar businesses
- Advertises products and services at low cost
- May create a “one stop” shop to advertise community assets
- Provides new entrepreneurs with a target market for new products and services
- Builds an online awareness of your community’s entrepreneurial business activities
- Could encourage other potential entrepreneurs to enter the market

How does one or a community create a virtual mall?

1-First, you must decide what type of mall you need. Ask yourself, am I promoting

- products and services
- community and culture
- arts and crafts
- quality of life

2-Determine an interest for the mall.

- What stores will want space in the mall?
- Do these stores already have Web sites?
- Will they need to create a Web site?
- Will these stores want to maintain their own Web site?
- Will they want to have someone maintain their Web site?
- How much control will the store owner want?

3-Next decide what type of mall layout best suits your needs. To determine a layout go online and type, "virtual mall" into your favorite search engine and view some of the existing online malls for suggestions. Let's take a look at some different designs:

- <http://www.thevirtualmall.co.uk/>
This virtual mall has nearly 300 online shops. The mall resembles a typical American mall with five floors. Click on the directory to find shops or explore each floor on your own.
- http://www.thethriftshopper.com/sections/advertise%20with%20us/myspacevintage_mall.htm The virtual vintage mall has a different look; click on individual pictures and you enter a different store.
- <http://www.cantontradedays.com/> This virtual mall was developed for a Trade Days in Canton, Texas. Exhibitors have the opportunity to sell online or on site. The index allows you to shop by categories, markets, or alphabetically. Just click on the store you choose and you can also find its location at Trade Days.
- <http://jvm.com/> Jacksonville Virtual Mall is a directory of information about the area of Jacksonville; go to a topic of interest, click, and you have a Web site with information about the area. This is an informational mall.
- <http://www.slowtownmarketplace.com/> This virtual mall has it all; even music while you shop.

4-Designing a virtual mall will require the assistance of a professional. Consult your Chamber of Commerce, Small Business Development Center, or local university for a listing of reputable Web designers. After obtaining the list, ask the designer for a listing of Web sites, he/she has created so that you can preview their work. Select the person whose style and talent matches your needs. Since virtual malls are a relatively new concept, Web designers in your area may not have a portfolio of virtual mall designs for you to preview.

Next, discuss cost. Ask what services the Web designer provides and ask the cost for each. Then determine what you are willing to do and what you will need to out source with the Web designer.

5-Marketing your mall will be essential to the mall's success.

Submit your URL to the search engines. Most people purchase from using online search engines. Submit your URL to the big search engines: Google, Yahoo! MSN, Alta Vista, Excite, WebCrawler, Lycos, and HotBot.

URL submission sites for the major search engines:

<http://www.google.com/addurl/?continue=/addurl>

<http://search.yahoo.com/info/submit.html>
<https://ecom.yahoo.com/dir/submit/intro/>
<http://www.dmoz.org/add.html>
<http://search.msn.com/docs/submit.aspx>

After signing up with search engines periodically check to make sure your site comes up when searched by using keywords. Keep in mind that it takes a month or longer after signing up for your site to appear. However, sometimes dead links develop and your site disappears so check periodically to make sure your site is available. The greatest factor in getting listed in search engines and ranking higher in search results is the number of outside links coming to your site. These "inbound" or "external" links originate from Web sites outside of your own and are weighed heavily by search engines in determining the value and position of your URL in search returns.

Cross promotion is another marketing tool that you can use. Link your site to other sites to get more visibility. Many sites offer reciprocal linking; if you link to their site, they will link to yours. This technique is most effective when the sites you exchange with have some relationship to your site, either as a recommendation or as a similar site.

Then, there is conventional advertising. Advertise your Web site on the radio, television, business cards, brochures, stationery, fax cover sheets, invoices, quotes, etc. Marketing your Web site via these traditional methods reinforces your product or service message and helps customers learn where they can make purchases.

Resources Available:

The LSU AgCenter has a team of Community Rural Development Agents who specialize in offering education in the areas of leadership, entrepreneurship, and value-added enterprises. Call any of these agents to learn about programs of interest in your area.

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