

MistralSoap.com Doubles Online Sales

Soap making learned from master craftsman

In 1993, Matthew Tilker, Mistral Soap's founder, was studying in Provence, France. There he met a 70-year-old master soap maker. In a family factory, the man crafted soaps according to a 300-year old traditional triple-milling process, always using the finest natural ingredients. The soap maker's artistry, love of his craft, and extraordinary knowledge and experience in soap making left a lasting impression on Matthew. After returning home to California, Matthew imported soaps directly from Provence and sold them from his mother's home during the 1994 holiday season.

The soaps were so popular that within months Matthew opened the first Mistral boutique on a quaint street in his hometown of Solana Beach, California. In 2001, a second Mistral boutique opened in Los Angeles.

Currently, the Mistral line offers customers thirty soap fragrances, as well as a full range of

Mistral-scented personal care products. In addition to the Mistral stores, customers can shop online at the **mistralsoap.com** website, the Mistral catalog, and at fine stores and boutiques in the US, Canada and internationally. We asked Matthew a few questions about his experience with a relatively new ecommerce Website.

Q: WHEN WAS THE CURRENT SITE LAUNCHED?

This current site was launched last November. However, Mistral has had an ecommerce site since 1994. This is our fourth version.

Q: ARE YOU PLEASED WITH THE SITE AND HAS THE SITE BEEN SUCCESSFUL?

We have a successful brick and mortar business, both retail and wholesale. The Website has always provided a nice additional income,



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but was not the focus of our business. About two years ago, we decided that this should be a priority and spent some time and money to build a state of the art Mistral Website. This is the first site that is achieving the growth levels we want and reflects the image we want to get across to the customer.

Q: HOW MANY PRODUCTS DO YOU HAVE NOW?

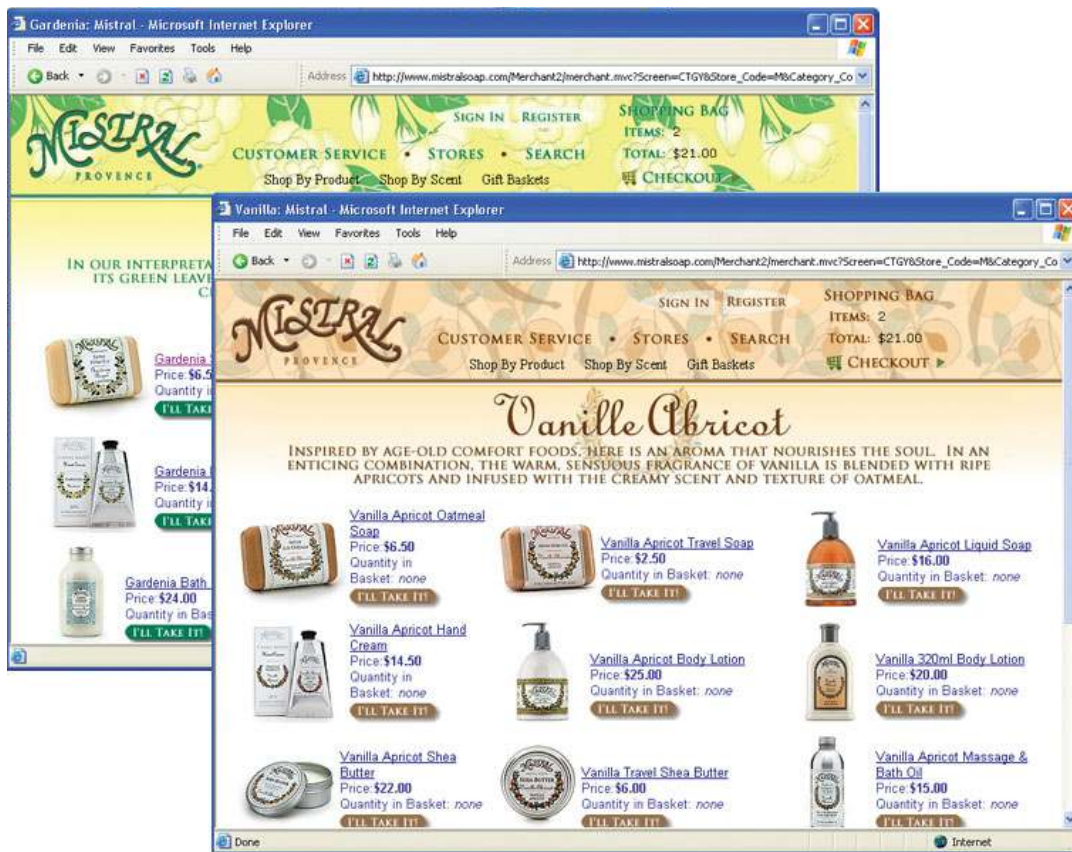
We have 242 products on our site, about double what we had last year.

Q: HOW MANY DID YOU START WITH?

Maybe, 20 to 25.

Q: WHAT HAS ANNUAL REVENUE PERCENTAGE GROWTH BEEN?

It goes in spurts. From '02 to '03, it increased about 70%. Last year, while we were working on our new site, business increased only about 15%. This year, we'll see explosive growth in the 80% to 100% range. We anticipate gross revenues from the Website to reach \$300,000 in 2005, which is about 10% of our overall total.



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Q: HOW MANY WEB-RELATED EMPLOYEES DO YOU HAVE?

This is hard to determine, since we all wear many hats, but figure two and a half employees. This includes order fulfillment, customer service, copywriting and marketing.

Q: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE A PROFESSIONAL WEBSITE DEVELOPER, VERSUS DOING IT YOURSELF?

We wanted a site that reflects the quality of our products and the brand image we are building. I researched the ecommerce landscape and culled from that which sites had the best look and feel, along with ease of use. That led to picking Tammy Moore, who owns Kaleidoscope Web Development (kdw3.com), to build the site that we envisioned.

Q: HOW DO YOU MARKET THE SITE?

Since we sell our products to hundreds of

stores and the URL is on all of our packaging, we have a built-in audience that grows with the rest of our business. In addition, our public relations firm has gotten our products and Web address into some great magazines, including *Oprah* and *Lucky*. We started with pay-per-click advertising in February, 2005, and the results have been dramatic. Our beautiful new site makes it easy to make changes to take advantage of the paid search results.

Q: HOW MUCH MONEY DID YOU INVEST TO GET YOUR SITE GOING?

We spent about \$12K to \$15K to get the site running. In addition, we hired the best product photographer we could find, using those images for both the website and a catalog. We are still making a lot of improvements (i.e. spending money) and phasing in new features that we had planned. It comes out to considerably more than what we spent on our original site 10 years

ago, which was a few hundred bucks and a couple of cases of wine.

Q: HAS HIRING A PUBLIC RELATIONS FIRM BEEN A GOOD INVESTMENT? HOW MUCH OF THE SITE'S SUCCESS DO YOU ATTRIBUTE TO THIS DECISION?

When you are trying to establish a luxury brand, this kind of exposure is an important component. PR helps all levels of our business. Brand awareness leads a customer to make a purchase at one of our wholesale accounts that leads to them finding our URL on the package, or brand awareness that helps bolster our pay-per-click advertising. It is all good. ☺

Editor's Note: To read additional information about MistralSoap.com including the modules used and the challenges faced in creating it, download Merchant Today, our monthly digital newsletter for Miva Merchant users, at PracticalCommerce.com.