

Why Small Business
will Win on the 'Net

The 'Net lets Brad and Gia Boyle run a niche business from rural Utah.

Forge a community of customers

Walkabout Travel Gear is proof that a having a niche and promoting community make for a successful Web business.

Located in Southeastern Utah and run out of a recreational vehicle, Walkabout sells gear for the independent adventure traveler ranging from a portable water purifier to an all-terrain money belt. Started by Brad and Gia Boyle four years ago, Walkabout grew from their own interest in budget travel.

"We're not glossy, but neither is the way we travel," Brad says of his straightforward web site, where selling items is almost a sideline. Much of the site contains travel advice, from links to online currency converters and country information to travel tips sent in by visitors. There's also a message board, for people looking for travel partners or wanting information on places to stay.

"We never treated the Internet as a place to use flashy advertising, but see it as a tool," Brad says. "Customers email us saying they are going to France, what type of converter will they need to run their laptops there? We can tell you exactly what you need. We also sell what you need, if you want to buy it here, but we're not pushy salespeople."

The Boyle's launched Walkabout with \$10,000 of their own savings. The company grew 45 percent last year and averaged annual commissions of close to \$250,000. With no permanent employees, only seasonal help, the Boyle's can indulge their passion from a remote area that would never support a specialty retail store.

Walkabout collects customer information by asking site visitors to register for a free print or electronic catalog, or a monthly electronic travel newsletter. The Boyle's are strict about not selling their customer information.

Brad's tip for small businesses putting up a web site is to keep it simple, and do as much of it yourself as possible. "Lots of the Internet stuff isn't that complex, but you can pay a lot to hire someone to do it," he says. "I wouldn't throw a lot of money at it. I'd learn to put up a fundamental site myself."

Most of Brad's time is spent responding to email and updating the site, not only adding new items for sale, but also new links to travel information sites. That freshness keeps customers returning, even if they have no intention to buy.

"We wanted our web site to be a reference source as well as sell things," Brad says. "We focus on the customers, and the site is a forum for them."

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www.walkabouttravelgear.com

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