

For Greg Burgess, the travel business is essentially a one-man show! He has run his agency, BeachHut Vacations, since 1995 as a retail storefront. While chatting with him on the phone, he puts you on hold to tend to a customer, hand off a document, or answer another call. He comes back and hasn't missed a beat. He remembers his point in the conversation and has as much enthusiasm now and maybe even more.

It is certainly adrenaline and passion that drive his business. And maybe a love of sun and beach weather.

At one time, Burgess' storefront agency was one of a half dozen in his small, rainy town of Shelton, Washington, about 60 miles outside Seattle. Today, it's just him and one other home-based agent in the market.

He generates about \$1 million a year in sales. That is a combination of travel, tanning and beachwear. If sun is involved, he sells it.

But, almost since the inception of his business, Burgess has had another element that is—according to him—essential to his business. He has had a website.

“Since 1996 we have had a website. Basically since NexCite came out, we have been using it. We used their email services before the website option was available,” he said. For him, email has been the key driver to date.

“We are emailing regular by weekly emails. These emails are automatically generated by Passport Online.”

Burgess is also a member of Vacation.com and participates in any and all special supplier emails that become available through Passport and VCOM.

“I am probably emailing three times a month to my customers, but I don't do any of that work. It is all automatically done by Passport Online.”

A few years back, when he handled the distribution of emails himself, he was sending out to maybe 500 or so customers at a time. Today, his email list is at about 2,000 names. One thing Burgess admits, however, is that it isn't necessarily the email offer that generates the sales.

“I don't know that I have ever sold the exact thing that I emailed. I think the same thing about direct mail. Don't know that I have ever sold a specific offer. But talking to your customers and sending good offers creates awareness, and makes them say I need to call and get my plans under way.” The email makes the phone ring. The sales person makes the sale.

On his website, consumers are asked to sign up for his mailing list and entered to win a prize. All of that has been programmed and built by Passport Online and that is what generates his email database.

Today, not much of any business gets completed on his website. Folks can't actually book travel today. And he does generate some Trip Requests, but those are not flying in his office today. However, he truly believes his website is absolutely essential in his current survival and his future success.

"I think the website is a brochure for our business. In the future it may be important to have some online booking stuff there. So we can say, book either place. You can deal with your local agency or you can go deal with someone you don't know.

"The whole Internet, I relate it many times, back to how the Yellow Pages started. When it first came out no one wanted to be in there. They didn't want to tip off competitors. But then it became, I have to be there. I need to be exposed to more customers.

With the websites, at first it was magic for shoppers. More and more people, today, however are saying that was fun, but I want someone to actually do the work for me," he said.

And that is when the full service travel agency comes back into the picture, according Burgess. But he believes those customers demand and expect his agency to be on the web too.

"We are still trying to develop what our website does for us. It helped us build up list of email recipients and been a great place to send clients and tell them they can research. We want to show them that Expedia is not the only one with a website. Hey, we have one too."

Burgess said the magic of the Internet and the marketing power of Expedia and the like is still a challenge. "It is still hard to get it through to clients. They still think the Internet is some magical thing. I try to get through to my clients that are shopping these sites that buying from those guys might actually be the first chance they get to speak live to someone from India. Shopping on my site, they are talking to someone down the street." It is still a shopping environment, for Burgess' customer base. "They are on there comparing rates. We can match what we need to match. We can be in that game. Today, the most important thing we have done is have a website and a presence. The most important part is to be there."