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ings. Forrester reports that more than 75 percent of online shoppers rely on reviews for candid product advice, while Internet measurement firm comScore found that even when making a purchase offline in a physical store, 25 percent of shoppers consult online reviews first.

Many merchants balk at the prospect of seeing their sites plastered with negative product feedback. But these

number of formats, from a headline-style feed on their iGoogle or Yahoo! homepages to a drop-down list of links anchored directly in their browsers. The list keeps shoppers up-to-date from beyond your e-commerce site, allowing them to pick and click links that take them directly to the information that's most relevant.

The key to successful RSS content is to keep it new and fresh; therefore, consider making feeds first and foremost for new products, just-reduced items and seasonal promotions.

Offer product-specific variations, such as apparel by gender, particular brands, products within a specific price range—and consider letting shoppers customize their own feeds. Amazon.com allows shoppers to pick from several drop-down options—product category, discount amount and maximum

price—to create RSS lists that are most relevant to them.

#### 4. Blogs, vlogs and podcasts: Enriching content, engaging dialog

Blogs—running diaries of events and insights contributed by an individual or group—give you an opportunity to showcase expertise and open a dialog with consumers. It's a great forum for letting your brand's personality shine through; you can be more casual, irreverent, erudite or geeky on a blog than your product pages might otherwise reveal.

Depending on your audience, consider whether to limit your blog to text and words or whether you want to branch out into showcasing video snippets—in which case the blog can be called a vlog. Podcasting is another extension of blogging, giving shoppers a continually-updated feed of audio clips.

To boost effectiveness in any format, follow these best practices:

- Brand the blog environment with a look and feel consistent with your site, and link to your homepage.
- Blog about a topic your brand "owns"

authoritatively, one for which you can provide fascinating and compelling content. Peruvian Connection has focused its blog on textile arts, aligning the brand's luxury apparel with serious connoisseurs of fabric finery.

- At the same time, don't forget the commerce. Include links to current deals and specific products that are mentioned in the blog; maybe use the side columns of the page layout.

#### 5. Social networking sites: The ultimate frontier

If your customers are wild about MySpace or busily creating applications in Facebook, then it's time to dive into the world of social networks. These sites offer the ultimate opportunity to interact with customers: They can literally call your brand a "friend," or decide it's not worth the effort. So, serve them with a page that offers up plenty of extras: custom wallpaper, badges and instant-messaging icons to decorate their virtual spaces, and plenty of custom content to keep them coming back.

Social networking pages are ideal venues for encouraging shopper participation. Members of Gen Y—the demographic most heavily engaged in these sites—are more likely to want to share their opinions, according to Forrester Research; leverage this willingness to share by soliciting feedback, offering interactive contests and allowing them to weigh in with you and each other.

#### Focus on customers

The world of social computing can seem sprawling and chaotic. But by following your customers' cues and offering relevant and timely features, you can use social computing technologies to cement a brand connection, create a loyal following and give shoppers the tools to make informed purchases—all of which ultimately boosts the bottom line. ■

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To ensure its blog content remains of interest to customers, Peruvian Connection is careful not to stray from the textile arts niche that drives its product mix.

fears are largely unfounded; customer review platform provider Bazaarvoice found that positive reviews outweigh negative ones 8-to-1. You can further boost the reliability of reviews by:

- Including reviewer profiles that indicate their level of expertise and familiarity with the products at hand. At Burpee, for example, reviews can reveal the expertise level and location of the reviewer so that shoppers can focus on ratings from others whose garden climate and green thumb abilities most closely match their own.
- Adding sound and motion via video reviews to show products in action and give reviewers a further opportunity to show their personalities.

#### 3. RSS: Distributing product information in quick-scan format

RSS—which stands for Really Simple Syndication—enables you to offer a text-based list of your products. Shoppers can view the list in any