



Executives Impacting Asian Business

# Executives on the Move



**Robert Yellin**

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## Strategies to Get Your Website **NOTICED**

*In the breakneck world* of online business, there is perhaps nothing more important than having a visually appealing website that catches the eye *and* lures business. But the success of a traffic-stopping e-Commerce portal can be seriously undermined by poor customer service or slow feedback to client inquiries. How can entrepreneurs get more mileage from their Web presence and use it to overtake the opposition?

*Business writer Jonathon Walsh reveals some battle-tested tips for getting the most from a website in this report about a cutting edge Shizuoka-based company that is optimizing their portal to bring in the business – and attracting more than 770,000 hits a month.*

### *Full-on knowledge base*

American entrepreneur **Robert Yellin** runs *e-Yakimono.net*, an expanding *yakimono* (Japanese pottery) business founded in 2000 that is actively promoting and encouraging more people to become involved in the art.

Yellin, a writer and licensed antique dealer, has managed to build almost his entire business around an eye-catching, highly comprehensive website that is claimed to be the most extensive online English language database covering antique and contemporary Japanese pottery – and was named ‘Best of the Net’ by *about.com*. Packed full of *yakimono* information, history, photos and exhibition information, this in-depth information site contains more than 450 pages and 4,360 images of what’s what, who’s who, and much more.

In collaboration with [www.japanesepottery.com](http://www.japanesepottery.com) (the sister online pottery store offering hundreds of carefully selected, one-of-a-kind antique, modern, and contemporary works), *e-Yakimono.net* offers visitors the chance to explore, delight and savor the rich world of Japanese pottery in the English language.

**The result?** The portal is directly responsible for generating an impressive 85% of Yellin’s total revenues through a combination of sales through the online pottery store and website advertising.

### *Lack of information behind business creation*

**How and why did Yellin conceive the idea for starting his business?** “From writing a column in *The Japan Times* I knew the interest in Japanese ceramics was quite high, yet there was almost no information – or ways to acquire works – on the Web. I therefore decided it was time to correct that, and thus my websites were hatched.”

**Yellin's first indication that his business was going to be a success** occurred when he offered an out-of-print exhibition catalog from the late Bizen potter Sozan Kaneshige. "And within 30 minutes many e-mails arrived from around the world asking for it. I thought, 'Aha, this can work....'"

**One of the hurdles Yellin faced in the early stages** was building first-time clients' trust. "But that was never a problem once they take that 'click of faith'." Another issue was getting artists to understand the potential of the Internet. "Back in 1998, it was still in its infancy and potters didn't have computers or any idea what the Internet was!"

### *Daily offerings keep interest high*

Managing such a huge amount of information and images is a tall order by any stretch of the imagination. Exactly how much effort is involved in managing and updating the company websites? "I have been focusing on our Web gallery almost exclusively these days and have not paid much attention to the e-yakimono.net site, although I have a blog now where I can add brief snippets of information easily," Yellin explains. "To keep the interest – and sales – high, I offer at least one new work each weekday."

And the nitty-gritty? "It's a 9-to-5 job for me," he says. "Updating also involves being in touch with clients via e-mail, taking photos, processing the photos, uploading to the website and writing text; I do this all myself on top of locating works."

### *Fundamental factors*

Yellin believes the following should be considered fundamental factors when starting an e-Commerce site:

- Content
- Ease of navigation
- Clarity of product photos
- Consistency in offering new items weekly (otherwise people won't come back), and,
- Quick customer service – meaning speedy replies to all inquiries.

### *Don't twist the truth*

But even if an entrepreneur gets most of these factors right, there are still some important words of warning that it pays to heed when considering building and running a website. "Don't twist the truth," Yellin warns. "In this industry there are many savvy collectors and if you spruce up your listings and titles with words like 'Super,' 'Magnificent,' or 'Gorgeous,' people will not trust you. Also, don't expect instant success, it takes time to build up a following and also to have a website come up in the top of the search engines."

### *Danger: Roadblocks ahead*

"Basically it's all common sense," Yellin advises about spotting potentially hazardous roadblocks in the process of running a Web business. "There are more good people out there than fraudsters. In what I deal in most folks who are interested in this art form are generally great people. **Yet, if something doesn't 'smell' right, simply proceed with caution making sure payments are received before sending out product.** We always do that with first time clients, no matter how smooth everything appears."



*A colorful selection of some of the Yakimono products selling throughout the world from Yellin's business.*

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**For more information, please contact Jonathon Walsh – [info@businessgrow.net](mailto:info@businessgrow.net)**

**Getting potential customers to view your website is an ongoing challenge for many businesses. How can entrepreneurs on tight budgets get more eyes on their sites?**

“Hire a professional SEO specialist to help get your website further up the search engine rankings,” Yellin recommends about getting the website noticed by more potential customers. “It might take a few hundred dollars or so yet it’s very often worth it. Another way to get the website noticed by more people – if you’re not in a niche market – is to find the right periodicals and advertise in them.”

What other useful advice does Yellin have for people considering launching an e-Commerce site? **“Know your products, educate people at the same time, and be creative,”** he says, referring to the promotions and special exhibits his company runs. “Let your clients know you are always there for them and **answer all e-mails in a timely and polite fashion** – it’s best to treat an e-mail like a formal letter and not as some people do like an inter-office memo.”

### *Finding customers: meeting the challenge*

It goes without saying that finding customers is critical to a new business. How can entrepreneurs boost their chances of finding people to purchase their products and services? “I have almost never advertised or used auction sites such as Ebay,” Yellin says. “However, I did hire a Web consultant to get our sites and keywords into the search engines. That way when a person goes searching for say ‘Bizen’ or ‘Shino’ or ‘chawan’, our name almost inevitably comes up on top. I may be stubborn or simply foolish, yet I want clients to find us and not the other way around.”

**The most successful method Yellin has found to find customers is to simply be consistent with daily offerings.** “That way, clients are on their toes not knowing what Robert will show them today. This creates a type of heightened tension and awareness, and collectors are very competitive knowing what we offer is one-of-a-kind.”

### *Focus on providing something unique first*

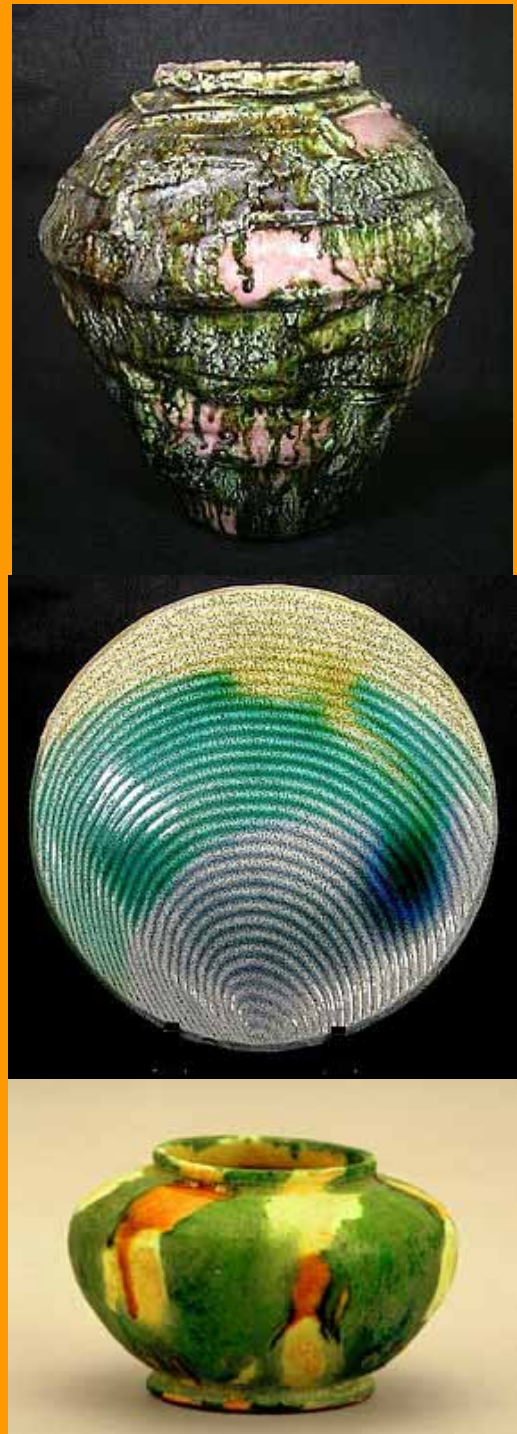
Based on Yellin’s own experience, what does he think are the keys to becoming a successful entrepreneur? **“Knowledge, passion, persistence, courtesy, prompt replies to clients, and honesty above all else. Focus on providing something unique first and don’t place money as your goal; if you’re good at what you do, money will come as a by-product.”**

Finally, Yellin highlights actions entrepreneurs should *not* do when setting up a business.

- **Don’t set goals too high too soon** – take your time by starting small and building from there.
- **Avoid cluttered website designs that confuse and turn visitors off** – the cleaner and easy to navigate sites are often the most successful.

What goals is Yellin planning to achieve in the future? “I have no goals, only to pursue the path I am on as it unfolds. I have a deep passionate interest in what I do and know we will go far. This is all leading into something grand, each day at a time.”

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