

July 15, 2011 1:06 PM

# Can't Come to Us? We'll Come to You!

By [Lindsay Blakely](#)



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Since 1965, the New York City-based distribution company [Almar Sales Company](#) has bought women's and children's fashion products from manufacturers around the globe. It then sells those products, including hair accessories, cosmetics and costume jewelry, to vendors around the country. Today, Almar has more than 3,000 clients nationwide, ranging in size from mom-and-pop stores to Walmart.

While selling to their bigger corporate clients can provide a large lump sum of business, the company has always made an effort to cater to smaller shops. "Relying on one or two major retailers, as many in our field do, is risky," says Allen Ash, the company's VP of sales.

Moreover, working with small shops is far from a quaint desire to help the little guys -- small business owners are much better clients, according to Ash. "They are the people who are in the store. He or she sees the customer traffic first hand, knows the clientele in-and-out, so we get much better feedback from them," Ash says. "Small shop owners help us build our business."

## **The Problem**

Historically Almar has relied on large trade shows to display their goods and to connect with customers. But as small shops struggled over the past ten years, more and more big-box stores popped up and came to dominate the market. As a result, Almar's valued customers were less able to travel to trade shows.

It became increasingly vital for the owners to be in their stores as much as possible. "Excellent customer service is the edge that small shop owners have over large stores," says Ash. "The reason many of their customers return is because they know they'll see the same face, and get personable service. So, owners need to be physically present as much as possible."

Not only were his target clients no longer coming to him, but they were migrating to his competitors -- the larger distribution companies. The reason: The bigger competitors had more streamlined ordering, and browsing methods that didn't require travel to tradeshow.

## **The Solution**

To reconnect with its valuable small business clients, Almar couldn't rely on customers to come to

it; it would have to go to the customers. The company started an online marketplace project in 2005 -- when trade show attendance first started to peter out -- but it gained momentum when the recession hit and mom-and-pop stores faced even steeper budget cuts.

The idea was to offer that personal relationship that customers get with Almar and value, but do it online so no face-to-face interaction would be required. The online marketplace finally hit its stride in 2009, four years after it started. "We're very conservative as a company in general, so we're very careful about what we do," Ash says. As a result, developing the right model was a process of gradually adding features, rather than experimenting right out of the gate.

Now customers can view all 4,000 of Almar's products, as well as see how much of that product is in stock on a real-time basis. Timing is particularly crucial for small retailers: One busy weekend can create empty shelves that need to be filled overnight.

The site also allows customers to make a unique profile with information such as geographic location, target demographic, and available retail space, so that Almar can give individualized purchasing guidance. For instance, Ash might recommend "silly bands" for a children's clothing store in New York. "Those have been all the rage," he says. And we know about hot trends like that before the small shop owners because we're constantly sourcing markets all over the globe."

### **The Aftermath**

Almar's annual sales currently top \$50 million. Its annual revenue went up by 60% in 2010, and another 30% so far in 2011. Ash says the boost in sales was largely due to the online marketplace.

Thus far Almar has focused on its core customer base, but the next goal is to expand the client base on the Web with a more visible online presence. To do so, and to continue making the site more interactive and more efficient, Almar's team has increased its 2011 online marketing budget by 1000%.

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