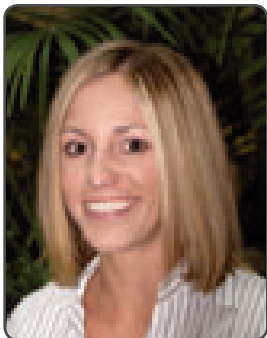


## Death of the Salesman?



While it's no surprise that sales are down, as consumers tighten their wallets amid economic recession, it may surprise you to know that when it comes to Internet sales, the outlook is fairly positive.

Online sales held up better than the rest of the retail market during the bleak 2008 holiday season, and on the day dubbed "Cyber Monday"—traditionally one of the busiest online shopping days of the year—online retailers saw a 15% increase in sales from 2007.

So what does this cyber jargon mean for the average water treatment dealer? As consumers increasingly turn to the Web to purchase almost anything you can imagine, stop and think: what's keeping them from purchasing a water softener from the confines of their home at 2 a.m.?

Early predictions for our industry show that we will see an increase in Internet sales this year. Softening systems in particular are being shipped directly from suppliers to the consumers, accompanied by easy-to-follow instructions for assembly and installation. In fact, a quick Google search of "how to install a water softener" pulled up close to 3 million different websites with instructions.

So not only can consumers purchase a softening system from home at any time of day and install the system themselves once it arrives in five to 10 business days, but they can also bypass ever having to arrange an appointment and interact with a salesperson.

But let's not forget why it is consumers would ever turn to a water dealer in the first place—service and reliability. What happens when that water softener purchased on the Web stops working in three months? Or what if the system is damaged? Do you think there is any warranty service with something bought online from, say, eBay? (And yes, there are systems available on eBay.) Your customers are buying much more than just a softener when they turn to you for their water treatment needs.

There is no denying the fact that online sales will be a factor our industry will have to deal with in the near future. And it is true that all small businesses should maintain a multichannel presence, which includes the Internet in particular. So if your company does not have a Web presence, you need to develop a website ASAP.

If you already have a functioning website, consider enhancing it in 2009. This day and age, your website needs to have more than just a "Contact Us" page. Make your site interactive—create a page in which customers can order salt refills directly from your website. But make sure your page is secure if you will be processing customers' credit information over the Internet. Or perhaps you can set up a page in which customers can schedule appointments directly online.

There are several effective ways in which you can utilize the Internet to improve your business. You may need to think outside the box with this one, but there are plenty of resources out there to help.

If done properly, your website can essentially become another valuable member of your sales team—one who works a 24-hour shift and doesn't require a salary and benefits. Now that doesn't sound so bad after all.

*Stephanie Harris*

Stephanie Harris, managing editor  
sharris@sgcmail.com

### coming up next month

The March issue of *Water Quality Products* will feature residential water treatment, water reuse and recycling, financing, filtration media, bacteria removal, sales and business solutions and WQA Aquatech USA 2009 show highlights. Be sure to visit our website at [www.wqpmag.com](http://www.wqpmag.com) for daily industry news updates.

## WATER QUALITY PRODUCTS

Scranton Gillette Communications, Inc.  
3030 W. Salt Creek Ln., #201, Arlington Heights, IL 60005-5025  
tel: 847.391.1000 fax: 847.390.0408

### editorial staff

[wqpeditor@sgcmail.com](mailto:wqpeditor@sgcmail.com)

<b>Editorial Director</b>	Neda Simeonova
<b>Managing Editor</b>	Stephanie Harris
<b>Associate Editor</b>	Caitlin Cunningham
<b>Associate Editor</b>	Clare Pierson
<b>Associate Editor</b>	Rebecca Wilhelm
<b>Graphic Designer</b>	Melissa Rosenquist
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<b>Web Production Editor</b>	Morgan Jeffrey

### advertising & sales

<b>National Sales Manager</b>	Don Heidkamp	847.391.1047
<a href="mailto:dheidkamp@sgcmail.com">dheidkamp@sgcmail.com</a>		
<b>Regional Sales Manager</b>	Heather Madril	480.941.0510, ext.24
<a href="mailto:hmadril@sgcmail.com">hmadril@sgcmail.com</a>		
<b>Classified Ad Sales Manager</b>	Donna Aly	480.941.0510, ext.13
<a href="mailto:daly@sgcmail.com">daly@sgcmail.com</a>		
<b>Internet Sales Representative</b>	Michael Mansour	480.941.0510, ext.16
<a href="mailto:mmansour@sgcmail.com">mmansour@sgcmail.com</a>		
<b>Advertising Contract Manager</b>	Shirley Marcinko	847.391.1028
<a href="mailto:smarcinko@sgcmail.com">smarcinko@sgcmail.com</a>		
<b>Reprint Coordinator</b>	Adrienne Miller	847.391.1036
<a href="mailto:amiller@sgcmail.com">amiller@sgcmail.com</a>		

### management

<b>Vice President/Publisher</b>	Dennis Martyka	<a href="mailto:dmartyka@sgcmail.com">dmartyka@sgcmail.com</a>
<b>Production Manager</b>	Scott Figi	<a href="mailto:sfigi@sgcmail.com">sfigi@sgcmail.com</a>
<b>Manager of Prepress Operations</b>	Dan Soltis	<a href="mailto:dsoltis@sgcmail.com">dsoltis@sgcmail.com</a>
<b>VP of Human Resources</b>	Ann O'Neill	<a href="mailto:humanresources@sgcmail.com">humanresources@sgcmail.com</a>
<b>Director of Circulation</b>	Mike Serino	<a href="mailto:mserino@sgcmail.com">mserino@sgcmail.com</a>
<b>Director of Production Operations</b>	Judith H. Schmueser	<a href="mailto:jshmueser@sgcmail.com">jshmueser@sgcmail.com</a>

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