



▲ The website for Tom's Place, which stars a moving, talking Tom Mihalik.

The personal touch

Advances in Web technology are proving that talk — and movement — really can be cheap

By Denise Deveau

Tom Mihalik, owner of Tom's Place, a retail institution in the heart of Toronto's Kensington market, loves the fact that people on the street recognize him as the "4-for-1 Suit Guy." "It's a good thing to know that people take notice," he says.

If his new Web site works as intended, chances are they're going to notice him even more. Recently, the Tom's Place site introduced a walking, talking miniature Mihalik who acts as a greeter to chat with online browsers about in-store promotions, point them to navigation links, and help them with anything else they need to know.

While the notion of interactive greeters has found traction on sites of such larger retailers as Future Shop and Wal-Mart, the technology behind SiteGreeter is definitely new for independent retailers, the majority of whom have to work with limited budgets for advertising and Web development.

According to David Hurdon, owner of NetVideoMaker.com, SiteGreeter is a great way for retailers to engage visitors without a lot of expense. "The greeter can be used to sell specific products, direct traffic, suggest items, and whatever else you decide you want," he explains. "People like Tom are already the face of their business; he's just carrying it one extra step."

This is far from the notion of posting a video clip in a box on your site and hoping visitors press "play." The process works by adding a transparent "floating" video layer on top of a store's existing Web page so that the greeter can move about freely. Multiple video segments (about 15 seconds in length) are filmed at the location of a retailer's choice in a single recording session on a bluescreen background. Within a week, a set of files is sent to the retailer along with instructions on how to upload and change the video clips on the server. Total cost for filming up to six segments is typically under \$2,000.

Mike Phillips, President of MVP Marketing in Toronto, says concepts like this are ideal for retailers like Mihalik: "Tom is very much his business. He is the brand. Putting the principal owner front and centre is important for a lot of small retailers."

Mihalik agrees, saying that having a Web site that speaks to his customers is a big deal given that his site can log 500 to 600 customer visits daily during promotions. "I'm a small businessman, but I have to think like a big business," he says. "I have to be able to sell to people when they come into my store or visit my site. It's very important to have my name and logo out there."

Not to mention, it appears, his voice and face as well. ■