Build A Website That Sells

10 EASY WAYS To Grow Your Website

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WHAT'S YOUR PLAN?
Need a website? Here's where to start.

TIMES HAVE CHANGED. Business has changed. The way you market your business has changed. And if you want to succeed in business, you need to change, too. That means, in 21st century language, you need to have a website for your business. For most of you, that means creating a site to promote and market your company. It's also a great way to learn more about prospective and existing clients and build relationships with them. Whatever your web strategy is, there's always room for improvement. This book tells you how to make your business's website more effective, helps you determine what you can do yourself and when it's best to outsource, and shares the best industry practices.

Now that you've decided to take another look at your site, you have to determine exactly what you want your site to do and what kind of experience you want your online customers to have. Is it informational only? Will you use it to promote and create awareness of your service business? Or do you want to drive customers to your brick-and-mortar shop? Do you want to start selling products online, either from your own site or from an online marketplace like eBay or Amazon.com? That's what a web plan is for. Preparing one will help you better understand your market and set goals for your site.

Start your plan by asking yourself some crucial questions: Who are your target customers? What do they want and/or need? What do you want to accomplish? What are your competitors doing? Do you have a time frame, and is it flexible? Think about your promotional strategy. Your site is a great vehicle to distribute information about your company, gather customer feedback and even sell products or services. How are you going to take advantage of that?

Remember, your website reflects you, your business and the services you are providing. That's why it is imperative you do it right. Don't worry, though—creating a strong and successful website is not as difficult as you might think. Essentially, there are four simple steps you should follow.

HOW TO CREATE A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

■ **STEP 1:** Start by creating a basic road map. This will set the tone for what you're doing. Keep in mind that this is an evolutionary process. In the beginning, don't try to be Amazon.com. (It took them years to become a web powerhouse.) Grandiose visions are fine, but you need to build up to realizing them. Start small and grow big.

■ **STEP 2:** Determine what tools you need to help drive the right traffic to your site. The web is a very competitive space—today there are over 11 billion web pages, so you need to be strategic in deciding what works best for you. Some of these tools include search engine marketing, e-mail marketing and search engine optimization. Also, now's the time to decide how and where you're going to spend your (limited) marketing budget.

■ **STEP 3:** How will you determine what's working on your site and what isn't? Some industry best practices will work for you; others may need some tinkering. Deciding how to measure your ROI (return on investment) and other crucial metrics is key to the success of your business. The best way to find this out is through website traffic reports, but you should listen to your customers as well. They will let you know what market tactics are working for you, what ones aren't, and how to improve your results. You'll need to go further than that—but don't worry, there's a lot of help out there to make these tasks easier.

■ **STEP 4:** Apply what you learn from your metrics. These include page views, length of visits, site traffic volume and trends, and you should study them to improve your site's content, navigation and performance. This enables you to offer a better experience to your visitors.

It's a 360-degree process. Once you get to step 4, cycle back to step 1, refine your vision, and go through the whole process again. Following the cycle enables you to continually learn, grow and evolve your business more intelligently.

Now that you've done some important preliminary work, you're ready for the big challenge— retooling and improving your company's website. Throughout this book, you'll find more in-depth information on the key elements of a good website: structure, design, navigation, content and credibility. Learn how to get to know your customers and start an ongoing relationship with them. We'll also tell you about securing your site, the keys to smart web marketing, and how to use content to your advantage. After reading this, you'll not only be more informed about your web strategy, but you'll be eager to get going. So let's get started.

Chapter 2:
MARKET FORCES
Use your website as a marketing tool.

A **RE YOU USING YOUR WEBSITE TO MARKET YOUR BUSINESS?** If not, you should. Your site is an important part of your marketing arsenal and can be a very effective way to promote your business. You can take advantage of the marketing opportunity your site provides by gathering as much information as possible about how your customers behave when they visit your website and using that information to make improvements.

Start by asking yourself some key questions. Why are people coming to my site? Where are they coming from? What pages are they visiting? How long do they stay? How many are taking action (e.g., signing up or purchasing)? And finally, how do I drive the right traffic to my site? To find the answers, you need to start capturing data—and the good news is, all that information is easy to track. Once you've answered these questions, you should retool your site to offer exactly what your customers are looking for.

WEBSITE REPORTS

Your web hosting company should provide you with website traffic reports. (If they don't, you'll have to check your server logs using a reporting tool that helps you analyze the data.) The reports should tell you the sites or search engines that send visitors your way, how much time visitors spend on your site and which pages attract the most (and longest) views, how visitors navigate their way through your site, and which pages are most popular.

It's important to actually use the information you collect. This may mean changing your pages, content, links or navigation, or revamping your search engine marketing strategies to make sure that you're driving the right customers to your site. You're not playing a pure numbers game here. Web marketing is not just about aggregating numbers; it's about getting the right people to your site. You might think there's nothing wrong with your site. However, you may not be the best judge. Ask friends or colleagues to check out your site. You might be too close to it to see what visitors see. Are visitors turned off by your photographs and illustrations, incomprehensible headlines, too much clutter or even "ugly" colors? Presentation is key here—remember that there are more than 11 billion pages on the web, so you need to capture viewers' attention fast.

Once you get people to your site, engage them. Just talking about how wonderful you and your company are will turn potential customers off. The net is all about information. Many visitors come to your site to get key facts about your business, such as location, product or service offerings, prices or rates, and contact information, and they don't want to have to sift through tons of marketing-babble to find it. Make sure your site design helps visitors navigate to what they're looking for quickly and easily.

A REASON TO STAY

You need to give people a reason to stay, to learn and to buy. Attracting customers requires magnets—things that excite people and make them come back for more. Use promotions online just as you would offline. Let's say you run a bed-and-breakfast. Obviously, you want people to come to your site and book a stay. But maybe they're comparison shopping or just doing some research. How do you get them to buy now or at least bookmark your site for future use? The simple answer: Market to them. Offer a "three nights for the price of two" promotion, or run a contest for a free two-night midweek stay. Promotions keep customers and prospects engaged and eager to return to your site for another chance at the prize.

BUILD A PROSPECT DATABASE

It's also important to provide the proper mechanisms to collect e-mail addresses from your visitors in order to build a prospect database. There are various ways to do this. For instance, you could provide a visible "Contact Us" link. Throughout this book, you'll find details about the other ways to collect e-mail addresses from your customers the right way. Once visitors sign up—and remember, you need to get their permission to market to them—start a relationship. (For more on permission-based marketing, see "Helpful Tips & Tricks" on page 43.) Tell them about events in the area. Promote special holiday stays. Celebrate the opening of ski season. Send birthday or anniversary e-cards containing discounts and special offers. Reward returning customers with a glossy national B&B directory. Show them that you value their patronage. You can adopt these tactics no matter what type of business you operate.

Your website is more than just a Yellow Pages-type display ad. It's a dynamic marketing platform that should engage and inform customers. Look beyond the basics of who, what, when and how much, and use your imagination to create promotions and build content and hooks that bring visitors back for more.

Chapter 3:
KEEP IT SIMPLE

When it comes to site design, easy does it.
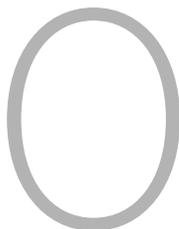
ONE OF THE GOLDEN RULES OF WEBSITE DESIGN IS: Keep it simple. This applies to your overall site, its graphics and the copy or words. Let's tackle them one at a time. First, make sure your site is not loaded with so many bells and whistles that your pages are slow to load. The faster people can navigate around your site, the more likely they'll be frequent visitors and buyers. Make sure you monitor your pages to check loading times and fix any broken links.

Sites don't need to be flashy. When designing your site, keep your target audience in mind. Use bandwidth-consuming audio and video judiciously. Don't put something up just because it wows you; it needs to wow your customers as well. And that wow shouldn't be restricted to design—it should encompass site functionality as well.

You want to create a site that's enjoyable for visitors to browse. Design your pages to allow customers to easily find what they're looking for. Users get bored and move on when they have to search through pages and pages of information to find what they need.

Don't clutter up your web pages. Some web entrepreneurs find that offering fewer products with more detailed descriptions translates into higher sales. For others, success comes from offering lots of products but categorizing and displaying them in a way that enhances the customer experience.

A WAY WITH WORDS

We all know words matter. And on the web, they matter even more. If your web copy is working, it will improve your search engine rankings, bring in (and retain) customers, and prompt visitors to pick up the phone so you can make the sale. To start, make sure you're not a jargon offender (that is, you shouldn't be so immersed in your own world that you can't say what you mean in plain English). Keep the words on your site clear of overly technical terms and industry jargon that only a small percentage of your prospective customers could possibly understand.

Headlines are often the first thing site visitors see, and good ones will grab your visitors' attention, compel people to read more and help establish a relationship between site visitors and your business. Try highlighting some problems your audience faces, and stress the main benefits of how your product or service can help them solve these challenges.

Good content gives users reasons to linger and absorb more of what you're offering. There are many ways to introduce this content. Don't worry if you're not a great writer. Reach out to friends, family members or colleagues for help. Try hiring an intern. There are plenty of college (or even high school) students majoring in English, advertising, marketing or journalism who would be eager to gain real-life experience.

Your web copy should be snappy and useful, and provide information readers can't easily find elsewhere. Are you an accountant? Put up a list of the "10 Dumbest Tax Mistakes." An electrician could post a list of dangerous goofs made by do-it-yourselfers. A day-care provider could list the "Top 10 Books for Kids" or "This Year's Best Educational Toys."

Good copy creates credibility and increases your visitors' trust so they feel comfortable doing business with you. But don't oversell. Your copy (and this includes product pitches and customer testimonials) should inform more than it brags. Your site isn't an ad; it's an opportunity to initiate a conversation with your visitors.

Make sure your words underscore the simplicity of using your site. The best websites are simple, easily digestible and easy to navigate. They make customers want to contact you and do business with you. Your site design and words should help site visitors want to take that next step.

Chapter 4:
SMOOTH SAILING
Create a clear navigation scheme.

AS YOU DESIGN YOUR SITE, remember to keep your site structure simple so that users are not bewildered by too many possibilities. You need to strike a balance between establishing your identity and making sure your visitors are not overwhelmed by the unfamiliar. When structuring your site, decide how many pages you're going to have, what is going to be on them and how they will link to each other. Choose graphics and icons that enhance the content without confusing the user. Pictures of adorable kids of different ages, for example, might work well if you're selling children's clothes, toys or books or have a baby-sitting or day-care service, but they won't work if you're providing legal or architectural services. In other words, your graphics should be relevant to your business and the image you're trying to create.

You should provide relevant links to enhance the user experience. If you have a website for convention planners, make it easy for visitors to link to city sites where they can find information about theaters, river cruises, museums, hotels, restaurants and more so convention attendees can check out recreational activities on their own.

SHOW THEM THE WAY

Whether you use an outside designer or do it yourself, concentrate on simplicity, readability and consistency. Cue your visitors with graphics, colors and fonts that make sense to them. Check out other sites to see what combinations of fonts, colors and graphics appeal to you, and incorporate what you like into your site—but be mindful of copyright rules and proprietary information.

Make sure your navigation lets visitors find what they want in two or three clicks. Don't make them sift through loads of information to track down what they're looking for. Site surfers want to feel like they're in charge, so you need to make it easy and enjoyable for them to browse your site. Use no more than five navigation bars and don't make visitors back up three or four links to get from one content area to another. Include a link back to the homepage on every page.

You can personalize some of your design and navigation to make the user experience easier and more intuitive. Let's say you're a Realtor. Your navigation could look something like this:

Home	Buying?	Selling?	Buying/Selling Tips	About Us

Finally, if you're selling products, you'll want to make payment a snap and give customers an easy way to pay you. Consider including an online order form and a toll-free ordering number or fax line for people who don't want to use their credit cards online.

Once you think you have a good navigation scheme, it's time to test it. Ask friends, colleagues and customers to try out your site and let you know how well they were able to get around. Ask your grandmother and your friend who's new to the web to take a look. Their feedback will tell you if your site has the right information and is easy to navigate. Take some time to refine your site, and it will pay off in a better web experience for all your visitors.

The elements you choose to highlight on your site will vary with your business. You may want to include some or all of the following:

- Customer testimonials
- Professional bio, background or credentials
- Guarantees, warranties and return policies
- Shipping costs and tracking information
- Special discounts or promotional offers
- Contact information
- Privacy policy
- Site map (This lists all the pages on your site and is typically organized in a hierarchical fashion. A site map helps visitors and search engines find pages on your site.)
- Buttons at the bottom of each page that send users back to your homepage

An easy-to-navigate, well-organized site puts your business in its best light and makes it simple for visitors to find what they're looking for. Keep your customers in mind at all times as you create and update your site, and you'll be well on your way to site success.

BEST PRACTICES

The rules of site design are not complicated. Just keep these dos and don'ts in mind:

Do:
- Make your site easy to navigate.
- Create a consistent look and feel throughout your site by using similar fonts, colors and layouts.
- Make sure your website works on more than one browser, e.g., Internet Explorer and Firefox (see "Helpful Tips & Tricks" on page 43 for more on this).
- Put the most important information near the top of the page so users don't have to scroll down to find it.
- Use headlines, icons, bullets, boldface words and color to draw attention to important content.
- Include your phone number on every page.
- Use high-quality graphics and photos, including your logo. Make sure the images are crisp but don't take too much time to load.

Don't:
- Use text and color combinations that are too busy or include distracting visuals that make the site hard to read.
- Let the content, especially the links on your website, become outdated.
- Include graphics or other design elements that slow down site performance.
- Put too much clutter on any one page.

For more don'ts, turn to "Don't You Dare!" on page 39.

Chapter 5:

TELL YOUR STORY

Help visitors get to know you.

GIVEN THE AMOUNT of competition on the web, you need to do everything you can to stand out from your competitors. Start on your homepage by positioning your company and explaining what sets you apart in your industry. This goes beyond describing the benefits of your product or service—this is about you and your company establishing credibility.

There are several ways to toot your own horn. Try to incorporate these, when relevant, on your site.

■ **Testimonials:** The best way to establish credibility is to show that your product or service really works. Including testimonials from satisfied customers explaining how your product or service has improved their lives does just that. And since it's from an objective third party (hopefully), it rings especially true to potential customers. It's best to include the names, locations and, if possible, small pictures of satisfied customers. This personalizes their messages, adds credibility to their statements and shows that they're real people who've enjoyed real benefits from your product. You'll get a

bigger payoff if you have testimonials from known sources such as newspapers or magazines, or from recognizable people such as civic, academic or industry leaders.

For instant impact, showcase your best testimonial(s) on your homepage. You should have a separate testimonials page as well. The more satisfied customers boasting about your company, the better—as long as they're credible.

■ **"About Us" & FAQ pages:** An "About Us" page provides information about you, your staff and your company. Post pictures of yourself and your staff. This takes the anonymity out of doing business on the web and shows customers they're buying from real people they can relate to.

On your FAQ (frequently asked questions) page, provide a list of your customers' most commonly asked questions and the answers to them. This can save you time and money. Instead of spending time answering customers' questions over the phone, you can put up an FAQ page, which allows customers to essentially self-serve and get the answers they're seeking. If you use a toll-free number, heading off customer calls with an FAQ page can save you lots of money.

■ **Contact information:** Provide full contact information, including your name, mailing address, fax and phone numbers, and an e-mail link to you or customer service in an easy-to-find place on your site. You should also post your phone number and/or e-mail address somewhere on every page. If you don't make it easy to reach you, some potential customers will jump to the conclusion that you're unprofessional or possibly even disreputable.

■ **News & announcements:** Include press releases and news about your company or your industry in this section. This helps you once again establish credibility through third-party sources.

■ **Media or press sections:** If you've been featured in any media, provide links to the articles. It's illegal to post the whole article unless you get permission from the media company that first published it. If you seek permission, make sure you also ask if you can use their logo. Showing a recognizable logo helps your visitors immediately identify the source of the story and adds more credibility to your business.

■ **Newsletters:** If you send out e-newsletters or e-mails to your customer and prospect lists, be sure to mention any articles about you or your company, and include links to them. You can get additional publicity (which brings more attention to your site and likely more eyeballs, too) by promoting it offline as well. (By offline, we're referring to more traditional forms of

advertising such as magazine ads and printed brochures.) If you've received coverage from a national media outlet, let your local newspaper know. Local newspaper editors (especially for the business section) often like to play up the fact that a local business owner is getting national media recognition. The same holds true for college alumni magazines, which like to promote the accomplishments of their graduates. This coverage can drive potential customers to your site.

■ **Video:** Many websites now incorporate video to highlight certain products, convey important information or just personalize the web experience. Video can be used to demonstrate products, illustrate a point, show a case study or even conduct virtual tours. Remember the old adage, "A picture is worth 1,000 words." Producing video is not as hard as you might think, but you have to make sure it enhances the user experience and doesn't detract from it. Make sure your video looks professional so it adds credibility. If you're in doubt, there are plenty of places you can turn to that will host the video for you.

Using these tools to give visitors a better idea of who you are and what your business does builds not only your credibility, but also the connection you share with your customers. Telling your story on your site will make visitors more comfortable buying from you and more likely to spread the word about your business.

Chapter 6:
IN WITH THE NEW
Keep your content up-to-date.

GETTING YOUR SITE LIVE AND LAUNCHED is only part of the battle. If you want to be successful, you'll need to give people a reason to visit your site often. Give visitors an incentive to keep coming back. One of the best ways to do this is by offering new or refreshed content. Frequent updates to your site will keep customers engaged and assure them that you're on top of things. But nothing turns off customers more than seeing outdated or irrelevant information.

The "K.I.S.S." (keep it simple, stupid) principle still applies. Resist the temptation to put something on your site just because you can. While video, audio, high-resolution graphics and Flash animation can certainly add value to your site, they can also make your pages slow to load. Remember, never post content that slows access to a page. Your customers will get tired of waiting and leave your site.

So what works? There are many ways to introduce content that gives users reasons to linger longer and absorb more of what you're offering. Try out a few tools, monitor user response and delete the ones that don't prove valuable. Update your content regularly. You know best what will work for your business, but a good guideline is to add new content weekly, or at least monthly. This isn't hard to do. But if you feel like you don't have the tools to modify the site yourself, you can use third-party companies, which provide tools to let you easily create and update your site with just a few clicks and no HTML knowledge required.

CONTENT CREATION

There are many ways to create interesting content:

■ **Polls and surveys:** People love to share their opinions. Polls work because they provide instant gratification and underscore interactivity—one of the net's best features. Ask any relevant question, whether it's related to a current event or connected to your site. If you're selling music, ask, "Who's your favorite Beatle?" On an auto site, let them vote for their favorite classic car. Polls should be short (never ask more than 10 questions in a poll—five or fewer is ideal).

Posting a poll is fairly easy. Your web hosting provider might offer a tool that lets you post a poll or survey. Or you can use a free website service that generates the HTML for you. You just copy and paste it where you want it to appear on your site, and you can get the results by e-mail.

You can also use surveys to gather information, but keep them short and offer a small reward (like a discount on a future purchase or a free sample item). Randomly choose a number of customers to survey, and then read and record every answer that comes in. Be specific about what you want to know. Ask your customers questions in such a way that you will get the answers you need. For more advanced surveys, check out a survey service provider, who can handle the setup and reporting for a small fee. This can be worthwhile if you expect hundreds or thousands of responses.

■ **Blogs:** A blog is a frequently updated online journal with lots of links. Blogs are a great viral marketing tool because they incorporate the elements of interactivity, community and collaboration. Use blogs as a platform to showcase your expertise and engage your customers on a

more personal level. Blogs give your business added credibility and visibility. Use them to offer content (tips are always good blog material) and to drive readers to your main site. See "Resource Center" on page 46 for more on blogging.

■ **RSS (really simple syndication) feeds:** Originally built to distribute syndicated news, RSS promises a host of other uses, including innovative marketing and content building on your site. RSS lets you instantly publish and receive bits of text. You can bolster content by adding RSS feeds from news services or blogs that will intrigue site visitors. RSS is still fairly technical and is used by savvy surfers, but it is gaining a wider audience. To see RSS in action, download and install an RSS reader from the web and follow the directions. You can also look for the small orange RSS icon on your favorite websites. Most browsers now have built-in RSS tools that let you view and organize RSS feeds.

One powerful way to use RSS is to have an RSS feed from your site that notifies subscribers when you update with new content. Talk to your web designer or web hosting company about adding RSS to your site, either as a way to bring in content from other websites to enrich your own site, or as a way to send out updates to interested visitors that want to keep track of your site. It can be a very flexible and powerful tool.

■ **Customer-driven content:** Constantly updating your content doesn't have to cost you endless hours or big bucks. One great way to get new content without having to write it all yourself or hire expensive freelancers is to ask your readers or customers for contributions. Many readers will jump at the chance to contribute just for the thrill of seeing their names in virtual print. For an easy way to provide content, offer a tip regularly. Post daily, weekly or even monthly, and don't worry about coming up with 365 daily tips; work on them a month or two at a time.

When it comes to the web, content is king. With tools ranging from polls to RSS feeds to blogs and even video, there's no reason not to have an updated and interesting website. Keep your content relevant and fresh, and you'll be able to give your web customers a compelling reason to revisit your site on a regular basis. That's the sort of customer relationship that is well worth cultivating.

Chapter 7:
GETTING TO KNOW THEM
Find out who's visiting your site.

KNOW THY CUSTOMER. If there's a first commandment of business, this is it. Just dealing with customers in person can tell you a lot about them. But for web entrepreneurs, getting to know customers is more of a challenge. It's important to tackle this since knowing your visitors helps you more precisely target them. If you suddenly notice a flood of visitors from, say, Japan, you could decide to edit part of your site to make it even more attractive to those users. If you see that you're a

hit with your target audience on a particular college campus or within a government agency, you can post a special deal just for those people. If you're marketing locally and see that you're getting a lot of traffic from a specific part of your city or state, that may be a signal to market there.

TRACKING YOUR TRAFFIC

The good news is that every website visitor leaves a trail. As we said earlier, your web hosting company should be a great help here. Find out what (free) reports your web host offers. When properly analyzed, these reports will give you the scoop on your visitors and key traffic trends. But don't stop there. Just reading the reports isn't enough—you need to use them. Familiarize yourself with the information, and then you can start tracking your site's performance. You'll be able to tell what impact a specific promotion has on increasing traffic or boosting business on the site.

If your web hosting company doesn't provide these traffic reports, you can get into your log files yourself. Go to your web hosting service and look for a directory called "Logs." Download the most recent file and have a look (any text editor should open the file). Plenty of programs can help you do this.

The analysis will enable you to see exactly where visitors come from, which pages they're viewing, how long they're staying, which links on the site are getting the most traffic, and, if you have an e-commerce site, which products on your site are being sold and where people give up and bail out of the ordering process.

The traffic reports from your web hosting service are a great first step toward getting to know your customers.

COLLECT E-MAIL ADDRESSES

You can get information from your visitors by giving them a reason to register or provide their e-mail addresses. You could offer a free sample, an e-book, a free e-newsletter subscription, or a white paper or report on a topic relevant to your audience. Another easy way to reach potential customers (and convert them to actual clients) is to provide a free 30-minute consultation. This is a great way to "strut your stuff" and impress people with what you have to offer in a no-risk atmosphere.

STAYING IN TOUCH

Once you have their e-mail addresses (with permission to send them mail), keep in touch by sending out newsletters, discount coupons, special offers or advance notices of sales and other promotions. For more on e-mail marketing, see "Helpful Tips & Tricks" on page 43.

Smart business owners use their sites to build customer databases, mailing lists and user profiles, which give them a better idea of who their customers are and how to better serve them. You can do this by adding a "Join my mailing list" sign-up box on your homepage, making it simple for visitors to add themselves to your e-mail list.

Finally, make sure you read and respond to your visitors' e-mails. These are a great source of information about what people like and don't like about your site and your business. Nothing beats advice straight from the customers' mouths. A word of caution here: Don't react to one or two comments. Look for themes or trends in what your customers are telling you or asking for, and then react appropriately.

READY, SET, SELL!

Get started in e-commerce.

B **USINESSES ARE NO LONGER STUCK** within their physical walls. You can take your products to where your customers are: the Internet. E-commerce is for companies of all sizes, whether selling products is your main focus or you're just looking to offer branded T-shirts and caps to surfers. Getting started with an online store used to mean hiring a web specialist to build it from the ground up, but now there are a host of savvy services that will get you up and running in a jiffy.

3 WAYS TO START SELLING ONLINE

#1: You can start by simply adding a PayPal button to your existing site so customers can pay you directly. PayPal can also help you build a basic order form to integrate into your site.

#2: You can list and sell your products on one (or more) of the big marketplace sites like eBay and Amazon.com. Using eBay in particular can be a good way to gauge demand, pricing and competition for your products.

#3: You can start from scratch and build an e-commerce site at your own domain name using either a web designer or a template-based web store building tool.

Finally, you may find that some combination of the above is what works best for you. For example, many online stores supplement their regular sales with eBay auctions. It can be a great way to sell unique items or returns that can't be sold as new.

WHAT'S YOUR SPECIALTY?

Before you fire up your online store, it's a good idea to know what you're getting into. Some product categories are already crowded with dominant players. Books and shoes, for example, are saturated with large sellers that can undercut just about any price. That's not to say you couldn't build a successful business in one of those areas. As a small startup or new online seller, your greatest strength could be in finding and mining a specific e-commerce niche. For example, if you found an untapped consumer base for rain boots or vintage mystery novels, that could be your ticket to specialty-market success.

ART OF THE START

The fastest and cheapest way to get started with an online web store is to look to your web service provider. Many large web hosting companies have an e-commerce option or an e-commerce solutions partner that can make building your first store a matter of pointing, clicking and adapting pre-made templates. Most of these basic web stores charge a monthly fee and a small transaction fee for each order. You can expect a starter plan to cost as little as $30 to $40 a month.

If your e-commerce effort is highly complex or requires a lot of customization, it can be a good idea to bring in a specialist for help. Ask a web designer if this is a service they can pro-

vide in addition to building your site. (For more on hiring a web designer,) Your e-commerce effort can be as simple or as advanced as you need it to be. Consider a system that ties your inventory and online store together to help simplify your record keeping. This can also help you avoid offering out-of-stock items to customers.

WEB STORE ESSENTIALS

#1: Photos tell the story. Good, clean pictures will help sell your products. Multiple views and pictures of different colors and options can also help reduce questions from shoppers looking for more information.

#2: Give the details. The quality of your item descriptions can make or break a sale. Be detailed, but don't ramble. Think about what your customers would need to know and want to know about each item, and answer those questions in the description.

#3: Keep it private. Make sure your privacy and security policy is easily accessible. Never share your customers' information, and always use proper encryption to handle sensitive data. This is often supplied by your e-commerce provider, but make sure to check with them first.

PAYMENTS AND FULFILLMENT

It's smart to offer your customers a variety of payment methods. A merchant account that lets you accept credit card payments is an important first step. Also consider integrating with PayPal as another popular payment option. Customers appreciate having a variety of shipping options, too. You can set up with your preferred shipping providers to automatically calculate costs for your buyers. While we're on the subject of payments, don't forget about complying with tax laws. If you need to, seek outside help from an e-commerce expert or consultant. If you're using a do-it-yourself online store solution, use the wizard to customize for your tax collection requirements.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Keeping in close contact with your customers is a must. If they send you an e-mail with a product or payment question, you need to be able to respond quickly. Aim to field every e-mail within 24 hours, and consider offering an online chat function as another avenue for communication. When it comes to keeping customers happy and coming back to your online store,

special coupons and discounts are a big incentive. Even a 10 percent off coupon or a free shipping bonus for customers can be a big boost to repeat business. A monthly e-mail letting customers know about new products and special deals with articles on relevant subjects can be a welcome form of advertising.

The tips and advice that apply to building a regular website also apply to your web store. Simple navigation, an attractive design and a smart approach to online marketing will give you a leg up over a lot of your competition. Throw in some top-notch customer service, and you'll be on your way to developing your e-commerce reputation.

Chapter 9:
SAFETY FIRST

Make your site a secure place to visit.
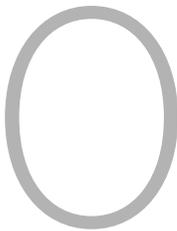
O**K, YOU'RE ALMOST DONE.** Your final step in improving your website is making sure your customers feel good about doing business with you. And the best way to do that is to establish a solid security and privacy policy. Start by checking your site for anything that could lead to security or privacy problems. Your goal is to eliminate these potential threats and make your site a safe place to do business.

WEBSITE SECURITY

There are many layers to website security. The physical security of the server your site is hosted on, firewalls and how you control who can make changes to your site are just a few of the things you have to consider. For five steps on securing your website, see the box on the following page.

5 STEPS TO BETTER SECURITY

Fortunately, just a little bit of legwork can help you determine if your site is properly protected.

#1: Choose a respected and established web hosting provider. Your host will be your first line of defense. Don't be afraid to ask questions about what it does for security.

#2: Be sure that your web host maintains tight physical security where it keeps its servers. It should also perform regular backups so that your site will stay up and running even if a server goes down. For instance, if you maintain your data on Microsoft Office Live, it is stored on systems with limited access in controlled locations. To find out more about Microsoft Office Live, go to the "Resource Center" on page 46.

#3: Watch out for unusual activity on your website. A sudden spike in bandwidth usage may be a tip-off that a hacker has infiltrated your site and is using it to send out spam. For more information on keeping your server safe from hackers, check out the "Resource Center."

#4: Consider hiring an IT or security professional or consultant to test your site's defenses. This is especially important if you work with highly sensitive data like customers' health information or financial data.

#5: Restrict employee access to your website. Only those who absolutely must be able to update it should have the password. Change the password on a regular basis. If an employee with access leaves your business, change the password immediately.

PRIVACY

Web users are very sensitive about their privacy. How can you reassure them that your site is safe? By creating and openly explaining your privacy policy. Many sites have a button at the bottom of their homepage that says "Privacy Policy." Once clicked, the link should deliver users to a clear, concise statement of what information is collected from them, what's done with it, and if it's made available to other companies. Go to the "Resource Center" on page 46 for a sample privacy policy from the Better Business Bureau.

Internet users are concerned about receiving unwanted spam or, more seriously, making themselves vulnerable to identity theft. Users don't want their data shared with other sites or businesses. Be careful how much you ask your customers. If you ask too many questions, many will refuse to answer. To get more, there needs to be an appropriate value exchange. Essentially, the amount of information you expect to get should be tied in to what the customer is receiving in return for giving you their data. If you want a lot of information, consider offering multiple reports or free samples to entice visitors into taking the time to answer your questions.

When an explicit privacy policy is combined with a third-party seal of approval (from, say, the Better Business Bureau or TRUSTe), buyers generally feel more secure about doing business with you. If you have e-commerce capabilities on your site, then be sure to use SSL technology, which provides secure communications online for tasks like web browsing, e-mailing, instant messaging, e-faxing and other data transfers, to secure your customers' data.

SPAM

E-mail marketing can be a very effective way to communicate with your customers and encourage repeat business. If you decide to try e-mail marketing, then you must follow the law when it comes to spam, or it will damage your credibility and brand. Nothing will drive customers away faster than spamming them. Let your customers opt in (double opt-ins are often preferable) to allow you to contact them in the first place. The CAN-SPAM Act, which was signed into law in 2003, requires commercial e-mail messages to be labeled and include opt-out instructions as well as the sender's physical address. It also prohibits the use of deceptive subject lines and false headers. For a link to the full guidelines, go the "Resource Center" on page 46.

Here's a sample of good opt-in language we use at Entrepreneur.com when you sign up for one of our e-newsletters:

Thank you for your subscription request.

In order to complete the subscription process and request, your confirmation is required. To confirm your recent Entrepreneur.com information request, simply click below.

As a special offer to our new subscribers, if you confirm your information request today, you will be able to download the following Entrepreneur.com e-book FREE of charge as our gift to you: Instant Start-Up Guide.

Confirm your information request today and get your FREE download by clicking **here**.
(Please do not reply to this message. If you are unable to click the link above, please copy and paste the link into your browser window.)

Remember: You may remove yourself from this service or change the content you receive at any time. To protect your privacy, we will not activate your request until you confirm. Our privacy policy can be viewed **here**.

Thanks!
Entrepreneur.com

Website security doesn't have to be a great mystery. Take a good dose of common sense, check into your web hosting provider's security policies, take time to craft a solid privacy policy of your own and be careful with your e-mail marketing efforts. Your diligence will increase your prospective customers' faith and trust in you.

Chapter 10:
A SITE TO BE SEEN

Now that you've built it, make them come.

A**T THE HEIGHT OF THE DOTCOM FRENZY,** web entrepreneurs copped a phrase from the popular movie *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, they will come." And it worked. Today, however, you need to do more. Customers will come to your site—if they can find it. That's why you need to be highly visible on the various search engines people use to find things on the web. In fact, in its report titled "The State of Search Engine Safety," McAfee (a producer of anti-virus software) reveals that about 80 percent of all website visits originate from a search query. Search engines are the principle way to drive people to your site, and there are three main aspects of search engines that any business needs to be aware of: site submissions, search engine optimization and search engine marketing.

SITE SUBMISSIONS

While there are hundreds of search engines to choose from, there's little value in being on an engine no one uses. Focus on the top high-traffic search engines: AOL, Ask.com, Google, Live Search and Yahoo!—which represent about 93 percent of all search engine use.

Almost every search engine provides tools for easy submission of new sites. Just go to the search engine homepage, look for an "Add URL" or "Submit Your Site" button, and then follow the directions. User submissions aren't the only—or even the main—way search engines compile their indexes. A popular tool used by the engines in scoping out the lay of the web are spiders— also called crawlers—which meander from site to site, following links and reporting findings to the search engine. Many web pages are discovered and crawled because other websites contain links to them. You want to make it as easy as possible for these crawlers to find your site.

But don't expect immediate results. It can take a month or so for the major crawlers to index your pages. Getting listed is the easy part. Gaining a high position in the search engines is another story, but that's where the money gets made. It doesn't pay to be the 207th pet accessories retailer listed. No one is going to wade through 21 screens to find you. Most searchers look at only one or two pages of search results before clicking on one or abandoning the search.

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

Can you improve your search engine ranking? There are definitely things you can do to increase your chances of showing up higher. One of the best ways to score high in search engines is to have good, solid content on your site that is related to the terms you think people will be searching for. It's also important to continually add new content or modify your site's existing content. Keyword-rich domain names, title tags, and having a site map can also help.

Be sure that every tactic you use is relevant to your business. Search engines will penalize sites that appear to be gaming the system by displaying tons of keywords and overstuffed meta tags. Hidden keywords (like white text hidden by a white background) are an absolute no-no.

Don't overlook the importance of links. Having a number of links on other sites that point to your site can be crucial in determining your search engine ranking. But don't exchange links with just any old site. Search engines can take into account the popularity and relevance of the sites that link to yours. Look to exchange links with quality sites in related fields. For more on links, see "Helpful Tips & Tricks" on page 43 and "Resource Center" on page 46.

Here's where a little terminology comes in handy. When you're making your site search engine-friendly, you're aiming to improve your ranking in the engine's "natural results." Natural results, sometimes called "organic results," are the sites that a search engine returns as the result of a query (see illustration below). Natural results are not the same as the "paid results" that pop up alongside as advertising. These ads should be part of your search engine marketing strategy, which is discussed on the following page. Some surfers prefer natural results to paid results, so it's important to make sure your site ranks as high as possible for relevant search terms.

Maximizing the number of times your website comes up in a search result is an ongoing process. It takes patience to monitor the search engines by visiting them frequently and checking your ranking under various relevant search terms. If you operate a business that relies on local customers, be sure to check how high your site appears when including your home city in the search terms. Many web hosting providers offer easy-to-read traffic reports that can give you a lot of information about where your visitors are coming from. Study these reports to see which search engines and key phrases send you the most traffic. If you discover that you need to make changes to your site to leverage your keywords within your pages (particularly your homepage) in order to move up in the search engine rankings, do so as soon as possible.

SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING

You don't have to rely on the spiders to find your site. You can be more proactive. Search engine marketing is a good way to step up and take action to make your site more visible and help ensure you are discovered on the first few pages of the search results. Some advantages of this type of marketing are that it is easy to control the costs and you can target very specific searches. You can target the entire U.S. or specific geographies. You'll be able to judge the effectiveness of the advertising by viewing reports and keeping track of how many visitors are sent to you from the search ads.

CREATING AN EFFECTIVE CAMPAIGN

Most search engine advertising programs let you establish a monthly budget and set a maximum cost per click so that you can stay in tight control of your marketing costs.

#1: Set up your personal account on each search engine.

#2: Select your desired keywords or key phrases.

#3: Create your text-based search ads.

#4: Determine the bid amount for each of your ads.

#5: Review your reports regularly after your search listings go live to see which keywords and campaigns are the most and least effective, and make the necessary changes.

The next step is to experiment with keywords and phrases. The copy you use in your keyword ads should be succinct and engaging. You should include your targeted keyword in your ad

copy. Make sure your ad contains a compelling call to action wherever possible. A look at the illustration on page 32 will show you where keyword ads (paid results) normally appear in the search results. For more advice on choosing keywords, see "Searching for Search Terms" below and .

> ## SEARCHING FOR SEARCH ITEMS
>
> There's a bit of an art and a bit of a science in choosing which terms to back with your advertising money when you're investing in search word marketing. Take advantage of some of the tools that are out there to help you find good candidates. Ideally, you're looking for keywords and phrases that are popular and relevant without being too general. There are some handy online tools available to help you out.
>
> If you're using a search engine advertising service like Microsoft adCenter, take advantage of the keyword research tools they offer their users. Wordtracker.com offers an advanced keyword research tool that can tell you how often people search for certain terms and how many competing sites are already using those terms. It also suggests keywords and keyword combinations that could be effective for your particular website. A free trial is available, and one-week subscriptions start at less than $30.
>
> Also visit inventory.overture.com, where you can run keywords for free to find out what the most popular phrases are and what related terms people are searching for. As you put together your list of keywords to use, don't forget to include plurals. You might even try out some common misspellings. Remember that search is always evolving. You can't just set it and forget it—you have to continually tweak your keywords and stay up-to-date with keyword research tools.

The more specific you are, the better. General search phrases like "electronics," "video games" and "shoes" are already crowded, and it will be hard to differentiate your business from the pack. It can also be very expensive to run a marketing campaign around these sorts of terms. If you have a specialty or niche, reflect that with your keyword choices.

LOCAL MOTION

Local search is on the rise, and entrepreneurs can take advantage of the trend. Local businesses should try out phrases that include their town. For example, if you have a tree-trimming business in Chicago, you might want to try out the phrases "Chicago arborist" or "tree trimming Chicago." Then, when surfers search for those terms, your advertisement

WHY PAY THE PRICE?

A well-run search engine marketing campaign can be one of the most cost-effective tools in your advertising arsenal. A report from US Bancorp Piper Jaffray runs the numbers down to show how search engine advertising stacks up against traditional advertising. The cost per lead from search engines came in at 29 cents. On the other hand, Yellow Pages advertising runs $1.18 per lead, and direct-mail inserts cost $9.94 per lead. Search advertising even beat out e-mail (which Piper Jaffray estimates at 50 cents per lead). All in all, search marketing can offer a substantial savings when it comes to finding qualified customer leads.

will pop up alongside the natural search results. Local search is a booming area and can be a great way to bring customers to your website and, in turn, to your physical location.

As with other aspects of working with search engines, it's important to keep your keyword campaigns relevant to your business. Don't be afraid to experiment with different keywords. Take advantage of the flexibility of search engine marketing programs to try out new keywords. A good search engine marketing program will provide you with easy-to-read reports that will help you judge the popularity and cost-effectiveness of each phrase or keyword. Expect to have a period of adjustment before your marketing is firing on all cylinders. Continue to refine your keywords as you go along.

> A recent study from Nielsen/NetRatings showed that 70 percent of those surveyed would use the net to find a local service business, and 68 percent said they would then contact the business by phone.

Success takes a one-two punch. First, your search engine savviness will hopefully bring in the right prospects. Second, your website should motivate prospects to contact you to learn more and, if you have an e-commerce site, to actually buy your products. A website designed with search engines in mind, combined with an effective search engine marketing program, is a recipe for Internet success.

CALL IN THE PROS
When should you hire a web designer?

LET'S BE HONEST: not everyone is cut out to spend hours programming or shuffling templates to build their own website. So how do you know when you should hire a pro? It's all about the value of your time and the desired quality of your website. If you can put yourself to better use by playing to your strengths and attending to other aspects of your business, hiring a professional web designer is a good investment.

You might have the time to build a website but lack the skill. It's often worthwhile to have an expert create a unique and professional look. Web designers know what fonts, font sizes, icons and graphics to use. Good designers know the right amount of content to use to get results. Web designers can help you take your site to the next level.

Don't be tempted to go with an inexpensive amateur or a friend of a friend who dabbles in web building. You need

someone who specializes in making clean, secure, well-designed business websites. This is the face you're showing the world, and it needs to be professional. It's easier to do it the right way from the start than to fix a messy site later on. After all, you may only get one chance to impress a prospect.

FIND A DESIGNER

With thousands upon thousands of potential web designers vying for your business, finding the right one may seem a little daunting. You might want to look locally if you absolutely need to visit with your designer in person. Otherwise, the nature of the web gives you access to a lot of great designers around the world. If you're comfortable working with a designer over the phone and by e-mail, you'll open up your options considerably.

Whether you search locally or look beyond your town, referrals are a great place to start your web designer search. Talk to other business owners about their experiences with their web designers. What did they like about them? Were they easy to work with? Was the site completed in a timely manner? As you narrow down potential candidates, take a look at the websites they've built. Check to see if they all look alike or if they're tailored to each business. Delve beyond the homepage to see how the sites are structured, if the navigation is simple and if the look is consistent. Then interview them, and ask about their experience designing business sites. See "Meet Your Match" at right for a checklist to help you choose the right designer.

MEET YOUR MATCH

■ **What's the rush?** Finding the right web designer is like finding the perfect architect to build an office building. Do your homework; check out sites you like and find out who designed them. Then narrow your decision down to a few, and thoroughly check out their work. Don't limit your search to where you live.

■ **Show 'em.** Before you talk to a designer, surf the web and print out what you like and what you don't. Be clear about what you want. Saying "I want a cool site" isn't good enough.

■ **Get it in writing.** Before you sign a contract with the designer you choose, make sure you have already registered the domain name in your own or your company's name. The contract should state that you have the perpetual and irrevocable rights to the material: to use it on your site and to reproduce, disseminate and change it. After you sign the contract, take notes during meetings with your designer so you can keep track of what's going on.

■ **Spell it out.** Determine who is responsible for what. What do you expect from the designer, and when will it be delivered? What will you be responsible for? Don't pay upfront. Instead, pay when predetermined goals are met.

■ **Try it out.** Before your site goes live, your designer should create a "shadow site" so you can test it. And don't give the OK until you're sure that it's ready to roll out. Remember, first impressions count with prospective customers.

■ **Get access.** Make sure you'll be able to make your own changes to your site after it launches without having to go back to the designer or your hosting company.

KEEPING CURRENT

Once you've created your site, it's crucial to keep it updated, whether it's with a calendar, coupons, contact information or company news. Many web designers and hosting companies will let you handle your own minor updates using a web interface. Or if you use Microsoft Office Live, your designer can use their tools to create your site, which then allows you to make minor changes while preserving the unique design your web pro created for you. This can save you lots of money and help you keep your site updated without having to wait for the web designer to do it. Be sure to ask how updates will be handled before you hire your designer.

It's smart to hire a web designer who will stick with you as your business grows. Your website should mature and change along with your company. A good web designer will be able to expand your site as needed and suggest helpful new tools or technologies. Do your homework before you hire, and you'll be getting not just a designer, but a web-savvy business partner as well. Also be sure to check out our "Resource Center" on page 46 for many helpful links on designing your website.

DON'T YOU DARE!

9 disastrous moves to avoid

N **OW THAT YOU KNOW** the crucial things you can (and should) do to improve and transform your website, you may think you're all set to go. But hold on a minute—our guess is there are some things that you're doing now or that your friends and colleagues are advising you to do that are, well, wrong. So before you go any further, check out these nine things that you should absolutely never do.

DON'T:

#1 Put too much personalization on the homepage.

Though you certainly want to create a personal experience and establish a relationship with your site visitors, having a picture of yourself on the homepage may be distracting and create the impression that your site is more amateur than professional. The point of your site is to offer solutions and benefits to users—it's about them, not about you. As we said earlier, there is an appropriate place for more personalized information—the "About Us" page.

#2 Be too flashy.

It's simple, actually: Simplicity pays. You don't want to overwhelm visitors (especially on your homepage) with fancy or poorly produced Flash presentations, tons of irrelevant pictures, or needless audio or video. Net users are impatient; they hate sitting around waiting for a site to load. So while you think your bells and whistles will win you accolades for creativity, if they're overdone, they are in fact stopping many potential visitors from ever getting to your homepage. And yes, we know more people are using broadband services, but that's still no excuse for you to overload your site.

#3 Create option overload.

Again, remember to keep it simple. Your site structure shouldn't offer an overwhelming choice of places to go. That just confuses people and distracts them from your primary message. Think about what you want them to do once they get to your site. If they can't decide where to click, they'll just leave. Give visitors up to five navigational choices for going deeper into your site. This is not to say you can't have supporting pages augmenting your basic information. But allow your visitors to dig deeper without cluttering up your pages, making them confusing and slow to load. Using a "Learn More" link to lead them to the supporting pages can be effective and help reduce page clutter.

DON'T:

#4 Neglect to fill security gaps.

You need to be as vigilant about checking your site for security and privacy violations as hackers and spammers are when they're searching for sites to break into.

Start with a reputable web hosting company, and double-check that they have security measures in place to protect your and your customers' data (assuming, of course, that you maintain this data on your site or within your intranet). If you keep sensitive information about your business practices, strategic partners, customers or clients, and vendors and suppliers anywhere online, then hire an expert to check out your site to make sure everything is properly secured.

#5 Include obtrusive advertising.

Online advertising has been going through a bit of a revival. You may want to join in by adding advertising to your site. That's OK, as long as you keep it relatively low-profile. That means no annoying pop-ups. Also, don't clutter your pages with ads all over the place. Flashing, blinking, bouncing ads will send your web visitors running. Pick one compact area on each page to run your ads. Also make sure the ads you run are relevant to your customers and your business. Inappropriate ads (selling Viagra if you're an accountant, for example) are distracting and can damage your credibility.

#6 Use jargon.

Unless you're running a site for a specific industry or catering to a very narrow target audience, don't use industry lingo. Some people think talking in techno-speak or using lots of industry jargon makes them seem like they have the inside scoop. Instead, it just turns off potential customers. They might be afraid to do business with you for fear they'll never understand you. Remember, the point of your website is to tell people what you do and convince them to do business with you. Always speak appropriately to your audience. In some cases, this means taking a conversational tone; in others, you will need to sound more formal.

DON'T:

#7 Forget to keep it real.

Your website is not an ad. Yes, it's your site, but as we said in Tip #1, it's not all about you. You should use testimonials and promote your press coverage, but there's a fine line between informing and boasting. Don't cross it.

#8 Chatter too much.

Online chats that aren't moderated are a recipe for disaster. There's too much that can possibly go wrong, and the potential payoff isn't worth it. If you want to have a more interactive relationship with your site's visitors, try starting a company blog instead. Blogs are easier to control than chats. (See "In With the New" on page 17 for more on blogs.) If you want to offer visitors a way to instantly get in touch, you might consider sharing your IM screen name. Another way to help cultivate relationships and build credibility with prospective customers or cement those with existing clients is to offer webinars.

#9 Leave bad links and outdated material posted.

Just because you've launched your website doesn't mean the hard work is over. You don't want to create a negative impression of your site or your business by having broken links, outdated information or irrelevant content. Check your site regularly and make the appropriate updates.

You obviously want your site to be unique, and not every rule applies without exception to every business. With certain businesses, your website might be enhanced if your picture was on the homepage. You might need to use lots of audio or other advanced applications to appeal to your users. Always consider the type of business you're running, who your target audience is, what your competitors are doing and what your industry standards are. Remember, you're trying to build lasting customer relationships.

HELPFUL TIPS & TRICKS

More ideas for improving your website

PERMISSION-BASED MARKETING

You have to make sure that your marketing messages are wanted. It's not just good business practice; it's also the law. Make it clear when customers sign up with you that you'll be e-mailing them, and give them an opportunity to opt out of hearing from you. Confirm by e-mail that they want to be on your list. It can also be helpful to let them know approximately how often you'll be sending them messages. Will it be monthly, weekly or whenever you update your product line? Offering a special discount or coupon for signing up can be a good incentive. A straightforward privacy policy and easy opt-out option will help you stay on the good side of both your customers and the law.

E-MAIL MARKETING

Plain-text e-mails don't cut it anymore—you need to spice up your e-mail marketing messages in both appearance and content. You don't need to go overboard with a lengthy missive, but consider adding short articles with interesting content related to what your business does. A "tip of the month" or "discount of the week" can be a great reason to send regular e-mails that your readers won't just toss into the trash.

Give your e-mails a professional appearance by building them with HTML. There are many customizable templates that provide a simple way to build HTML e-mails. E-mail marketing services can help you design attractive e-mails, or you can turn to your handy web designer for help in creating a template. Make sure your subject line is to the point and still compelling enough to entice customers to open it up. For example, "Summer Sale Starts Today!" is more likely to get opened than "Deals, Deals, Deals!" Finally, double-check your e-mails for spelling and grammar mistakes. Misspelled words can be a big turnoff for customers who expect professionalism.

DESIGN FOR ALL

There's a wide world of web browsers out there for the World Wide Web. Your site should look good no matter what browser your visitors use to access it. You don't have to try every single web browser available, but do be sure that your site works correctly and looks consistent in Internet Explorer and Firefox at the very least. If you find a problem, tweak your site to make it readable across most popular browsers.

GET LINKED UP

Start by making your site so great that it attracts linkers. Getting other relevant sites to link to yours is important to organic search marketing. It can take a while to build your links up, so be prepared to take it on as an ongoing project. Link trading with relevant (but not competing) businesses is a great first step. If your products compliment someone else's offerings and vice versa, they could be a good candidate for a link trade.

Approach your potential link partners with an e-mail written specifically for them. Tell them why you should become link buddies, and always offer to link back to them in exchange. Follow up a few weeks later if you need to. Once you've agreed to exchange links, list them promptly. Give them some time, but do check up to see if they've listed you as well. If you maintain a links page, organize it into sections or subjects so you don't end up with a long,

hard-to-browse page full of links. Keep an eye out as you're searching the web for strong link exchange candidates. Many other sites will be happy to help you out with this mutually beneficial linking relationship.

KEY KEYWORDS

Choosing the right keywords and phrases can make or break your search engine marketing campaign. Sometimes a little creative thinking can be a big boost. Don't be afraid to try very specific search terms. Think "organic cotton blue jeans" rather than just "jeans." You'll be more likely to show up in the search results for ready-to-purchase customers that are looking for specific items.

Bring in employees, friends or family members to help brainstorm keywords and keyword combinations. They may be able to generate unusual and useful ideas. Fortunately, search engine advertising is cost-effective enough that you can have the luxury of trying a lot of different keywords to discover which ones really work. Experiment and refine. Reevaluate your chosen keywords every few weeks. Follow that pattern and you'll be able to put your money behind the keywords that are most effective.

BLOGGING 101

Blogging can be a powerful tool for keeping customers up-to-date and for bringing web visitors back to your site again and again. Blogging can help you establish a dialogue with your customers and let you share your expertise and insight. There are many blog services online that can help you get started and walk you through the process. It's a lot easier than you might think. Three popular choices are Windows Live Spaces (http://spaces.live.com), Blogger (blogger.com) and Vox (vox.com).

Blogging is all about timeliness. Regular updates are a must to keep things fresh. They don't have to be long entries, but interesting and relevant bits of information or news about what's happening with your business and website are always welcome and recommended. Blogs can be both entertaining and informative. For example, if you recently attended a trade show for your industry, your blog readers might like to hear about what you found to be the hottest new products or what items you're planning to carry in your online store. It's free to get started with a blog, so give it a try.

RESOURCE CENTER
Helpful sites and articles

SMALL-BUSINESS SITES
Microsoft Office Live
www.officelive.com

Entrepreneur.com
www.entrepreneur.com

Office Online
www.microsoft.com/office

Office Live Web Seminars
www.officeliveseminars.com

Microsoft Small Business Center
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/hub.mspx

Microsoft Startup Center
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/
small-business-plus/startup_landing.aspx

Better Business Bureau
www.bbb.org
www.bbbonline.org

DESIGN 101
Helpful Sites:
Microsoft Expression
www.microsoft.com/Expression/
expression-studio/overview.aspx?nav=top

Microsoft Soapbox (online videos)
http://soapbox.msn.com

Website Pros
www.websitepros.com

LogoWorks
www.logoworks.com

LogoYes
www.logoyes.com

Helpful Articles:
Give Your Site an Extreme Makeover
www.entrepreneur.com/ebusiness/
operations/article170474.html

Improve Your Website's Reputation
www.entrepreneur.com/ebusiness/
searchoptimization/article80164.html

Give Your Website a Facelift: 11 Tips
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/
marketing/online_marketing/give_your_
web_site_a_facelift_11_tips.mspx

Hire a Professional
http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/officelive/
FX102243621033.aspx

ONLINE MARKETING
Helpful Sites:
eMarketer
www.emarketer.com

ClickZ
www.clickz.com

PayPal
www.paypal.com

Helpful Articles:
FTC's CAN-SPAM Act (for businesses doing
e-mail marketing)
www.ftc.gov/bcp/conline/edcams/spam/
business.htm

7 Ways to Get Customers' E-mail Addresses
(Legitimately)
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/
marketing/online_marketing/7_ways_to_get_
customers_email_addresses_legitimately.mspx

10 Rules for Successful Permission-Based
E-mail Marketing
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/
marketing/online_marketing/10_rules_for_
successful_permission_based_email_
marketing.mspx

How to Put Sizzle in Your E-mail Marketing
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/
marketing/online_marketing/how_to_put_
sizzle_in_your_email_marketing.mspx

Creating Spam-Free E-Mail
www.entrepreneur.com/marketing/online
marketing/emailmarketingcolumnistgail
fgoodman/article77972.html

Dos and Don'ts of E-Mail Marketing
www.dmnews.com/cms/dm-news/e-mail-
marketing/37312.html

5 Common E-Mail Marketing Mistakes
www.entrepreneur.com/marketing/online
marketing/emailmarketingcolumnistgail
fgoodman/article159404.html

8 Opt-In Offers Your Visitors Can't Refuse
www.entrepreneur.com/ebusiness/ebusiness
columnist/article165874.html

SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING & OPTIMIZATION

Helpful Sites:
Search Engine Watch
www.searchenginewatch.com

SEO Book
www.seobook.com

Website Traffic Analysis
www.selfseo.com/story-19289.php

Helpful Articles:
Search Marketing 101
www.entrepreneur.com/ebusiness/ebusiness
columnist/article176398.html

The Dos and Don'ts of Search
Engine Optimization
www.entrepreneur.com/ebusiness/search
optimization/article71916.html

Keyword Marketing With Office Live
http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/officelive/
FX102036291033.aspx

15 Tips for Timely, Effective Search
Engine Keywords
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/
marketing/online_marketing/15_tips_for_
timely_effective_search_engine_keywords.mspx

10 Steps to Getting Links to Your Site
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/
marketing/online_marketing/10_steps_to_
getting_links_to_your_site.mspx

Help People Find Your Website: 8 Tips
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/
marketing/online_marketing/help_people_
find_your_web_site_8_tips.mspx

SECURITY

Microsoft Security Guidance Center
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/support/
computer-security-overview.aspx

TRUSTe
www.truste.org

Hacker Safe
www.hackersafe.com

GeoTrust
www.geotrust.com

Verisign
www.verisign.com

Thawte
www.thawte.com

POLLS & SURVEYS

How to Use Online Surveys
www.entrepreneur.com/ebusiness/
sitedesign/article171918.html

3 Reasons to Use Online Customer Surveys
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/
marketing/market_research/3_reasons_to_
use_online_customer_surveys.mspx

BLOGGING

Should You Start a Business Blog?
www.entrepreneur.com/technology/techtrends
columnistpeteralexander/article175236.html

5 Ways Blogging Can Help Your Business
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/
marketing/online_marketing/5_ways_
blogging_can_help_your_business.mspx

Blogging for Business: 7 Tips for
Getting Started
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/
marketing/online_marketing/blogging_for_
business_7_tips_for_getting_started.mspx

TRAFFIC & REPORTING

5 Reasons to Track Website Traffic
www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/
marketing/online_marketing/5_reasons_to_
track_web_site_traffic.mspx

PRIVACY

Privacy for Small Business
www.bbb.org/securityandprivacy/faq.asp

How to Construct a Privacy Policy
www.thedma.org/privacy/creating.shtml

SAMPLE PRIVACY POLICY
From the Better Business Bureau

Effective month/day/year
Privacy Notice Table of Contents:

- Our Commitment to Privacy
- The Information We Collect
- How We Use Information
- Our Commitment to Data Security
- Our Commitment to Children's Privacy
- How to Access or Correct Your Information
- How to Contact Us

Our Commitment to Privacy

Your privacy is important to us. To better protect your privacy we provide this notice explaining our online information practices and the choices you can make about the way your information is collected and used. To make this notice easy to find, we make it available on our homepage and at every point where personally identifiable information may be requested.

The Information We Collect

This notice applies to all information collected or submitted on the [company name] website. On some pages, you can order products, make requests, and register to receive materials. The types of personal information collected at these pages are:

Name
Address
E-mail address
Phone number
Credit/Debit Card Information
(etc.)

On some pages, you can submit information about other people. For example, if you order a gift online and want it sent directly to the recipient, you will need to submit the recipient's address. In this circumstance, the types of personal information collected are:

> Name
> Address
> Phone Number
> (etc.)

How We Use Information

We use the information you provide about yourself when placing an order only to complete that order. We do not share this information with outside parties except to the extent necessary to complete that order.

We use the information you provide about someone else when placing an order only to ship the product and to confirm delivery. We do not share this information with outside parties except to the extent necessary to complete that order.

We offer gift cards by which you can personalize a product you order for another person. Information you provide to us to create a gift card is only used for that purpose, and it is only disclosed to the person receiving the gift.

We use return e-mail addresses to answer the e-mail we receive. Such addresses are not used for any other purpose and are not shared with outside parties.

You can register with our website if you would like to receive our catalog as well as updates on our new products and services. Information you submit on our website will not be used for this purpose unless you fill out the registration form.

We use non-identifying and aggregate information to better design our website and to share with advertisers. For example, we may tell an advertiser that X number of individuals visited a certain area on our website, or that Y number of men and Z number of women filled out our registration form, but we would not disclose anything that could be used to identify those individuals.

Finally, we never use or share the personally identifiable information provided to us online in ways unrelated to the ones described above without also providing you an opportunity to opt out or otherwise prohibit such unrelated uses.

Our Commitment to Data Security
To prevent unauthorized access, maintain data accuracy, and ensure the correct use of information, we have put in place appropriate physical, electronic, and managerial procedures to safeguard and secure the information we collect online.

Our Commitment to Children's Privacy
Protecting the privacy of the very young is especially important. For that reason, we never collect or maintain information at our website from those we actually know are under 13, and no part of our website is structured to attract anyone under 13.

How to Access or Correct Your Information
You can access all your personally identifiable information that we collect online and maintain by [description of the company access procedure]. We use this procedure to better safeguard your information.

You can correct factual errors in your personally identifiable information by sending us a request that credibly shows error.

To protect your privacy and security, we will also take reasonable steps to verify your identity before granting access or making corrections.

How to Contact Us
Should you have other questions or concerns about these privacy policies, please call us at [phone number] or send us an e-mail at [e-mail address].

Courtesy of www.bbbonline.org