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Starting an Online Business For Dummies

From Starting an Online Business For Dummies, 6th Edition by Greg Holden

Starting a business online is all about cutting overhead; getting your products and services in front of the public quickly' and marketing yourself in new, cost-effective ways. For the investment of a little sweat equity, you potentially reap big results. A new set of tools is available to online entrepreneurs these days, including viral marketing, social networking, and search engine optimization.

Goals and Models for Your Online Business

The place to start with your online business is to indulge in some brainstorming. Envisioning the type of business you want to operate is a creative way of asking the all-important questions: Why do I want to go into business online? What are my goals?

The following table illustrates some possible goals and suggests how to achieve them. Your options include sales, advertising, self-promotion, special interest, and product sales. By envisioning the final result you want to achieve, you can determine your online business goals.

Goal	Type of Web Site	What to Do
Make big bucks	Sales	Sell items/gain paying advertisers
Gain credibility and attention	Marketing	Start a blog; start Twittering; put your resume and samples of your work online
Promote yourself	Personal	Promote yourself in discussion groups or on your Web site so that people will hire you or want to use your goods or services
Turn an interest into a source of income	Hobby/special interest	Invite like-minded people to share your passion, participate in your site, and generate traffic so that you can gain advertisers

Finding a Web Server to Call Home

You say you're not sure exactly what kind of Web site is right for you, and you want to see all the options, from a tiny storefront in a strip mall to your own landscaped corporate park? You're in luck. You can set up shop with a variety of different hosting services, from an auction site to an online mall to your own Internet Service Provider.

Here's a road map of your options:

- **Online Web-host-and-design-kit combos:** Microsoft Office Live, Google

Sites, Yahoo! Small Business Merchant Solutions, and Microsoft Small Business Center (formerly called bCentral), among others.

- **Electronic merchant CD-ROMs:** ShopSite and WebSite Complete, to name two.

- **eBay:** A site that lets its users create their own About Me Web pages and their own stores.

- **Auxiliary companies:** These folks do something that doesn't seem directly related to e-commerce, but they let you build a store online, such as FedEx eCommerce Builder.

- **An online marketplace:** You can rent a space in these sites, where you can offer specialty items for sale, such as clothing, artwork, or antiques.

- **Your current Internet service provider (ISP):** Many ISPs are only too happy to host your e-commerce site — for an extra monthly fee in addition to your access fee.

- **Companies devoted to hosting Web sites full time:** These are businesses whose primary function is hosting e-commerce Web sites and providing their clients with associated software, such as Web page building tools, shopping carts, catalog builders, and the like.

The first five options combine Web hosting with Web page creation kits. Whether you buy these services or get to use them on the Web for free, you simply follow the manufacturer's instructions. Most of these hosting services enable you to create your Web pages by filling in forms; you never have to see a line of HTML code if you don't want to. Depending on which service you choose, you have varying degrees of control over how your site ultimately looks.

An SEO and Viral Marketing Checklist

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and viral marketing are two cost-effective and highly popular ways to get the word out about your online business. After you create your Web site, follow this checklist to make sure you aren't forgetting anything when it comes to optimizing your Web pages for indexing by Google and other search engines, and spreading the word about your products and services.

- **Put your keywords in the title.** Choose the keywords that your customers are likely to enter when they are searching for sites like yours, and make sure one or two (or more) appear in the titles of your Web pages.

- **Sprinkle around those keywords.** Make an effort to include your keywords in the headings on your pages, and in the text as well.

- **Add meta tags.** Meta tags are keywords added in the Head section of a Web page, between the <meta> and </meta> tags.

- **Register your site with Google.** Don't wait for Google to find you. Add your site to Google's database — and after that, to Bing's and Yahoo!'s sites as well.

- **Get on Facebook.** Create a "fan page" for your business on Facebook.

- **Start Twittering.** Promote your current sales and create special deals for those who find or follow you on Twitter.

- **The history of the Web page is important.** This includes the date the page was first discovered by a search engine.

- **Keep your Web page updated.** The frequency with which the content of the Web page changes is also important to SEO. This includes an average time between the changes, a number of changes in a time period, and a comparison of a rate of change in a current time period with a rate of

change in a previous time period.

- **Keep your site growing.** The number of new pages associated with the document matters as well.

- **Get linked.** Make sure your pages ink to other well-designed, content rich sites. The more links you have, the better your search results.

Schedule Your Online Sales and Shipping

Selling online, whether it's by yourself, with a partner, or with a team of employees, is full of tedious and time-consuming activities. You have to take and retake photos, edit those photos, get sales descriptions online, and do the packing and shipping that's required at the end of a sale.

The only way to come up with a sufficient number of online sales every week is to come up with a system. And a big part of coming up with a system is developing a weekly schedule. The following schedule spells out when you need to do all your eBay activities if you plan to get your sales online on a Sunday. But you can adapt it to any number of online businesses and schedules.

Day of Week	First Activity	Second Activity (optional)
Sunday	Get 7-day sales online	Send end-of-sale notices
Monday	Packing	E-mails
Tuesday	Shipping	E-mails
Wednesday	Plan garage sales	Take photos
Thursday	Go to garage sales	Prepare descriptions
Friday	More sales	Prepare descriptions
Saturday	Respond to buyer inquiries	Get some sales online

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