

NOT YET NET SAVVY? YOU SHOULD BE!

The first in a series of Internet Guides for Small Business by Tim Stackpool

The internet is the biggest on-line database of information and services in the world. If you are not making use of it, you are costing your business money. Good money. Think about all the things you need to do to run a successful small business. I'm not talking about products or services or the stuff that actually makes up the business. I'm talking about the things you need to work 'ON' your business: The market trends, the education and the technological innovations that may put you ahead (or behind) the pack. And what about the more tangible? Book-keeping, faxing, websites, email, advertising and more.



Only a few businesses run without the aid of a computer. The introduction of the GST probably forced the few remaining hold-outs to take the plunge. But without harnessing the internet, you are not giving your business the power it deserves, and you're probably working harder and spending more than you need to.

"OK, enough!" I hear you shout, "When does the real sales pitch begin?" I promise you, it won't. I am passionate about the internet. The exploitation of the internet took my own business from a sideline hobby, to a money-making obsession (just ask my wife!). In fact, without the internet, I probably wouldn't have survived in business.

Can the internet help any business? I think it can. I have a friend, a sculptor who works in metal. He creates works of art from scrap and welds them together into a pleasing form. All of his work is commissioned, either by indulgent homeowners who appreciate the individuality of his pieces, or by corporations who have a space to fill in their foyers. Sometimes my friend goes for months between jobs.

Recently, I convinced him to make a couple of uncommissioned pieces and retail them on the net via a website. I needed to convince him that it was worth spending the time building the pieces, writing the text for the site and checking his email daily. As you can imagine, my friend is a free-spirit and is not keen on the burden of 'prospecting' for clients.

Since developing a very simple website, featuring only three of his sculptures with his contact details, my friend has not gone a month without being commissioned for work, coming from both locally and abroad. And funnily enough, the work has come through the net without selling any of the featured pieces!

"Fine" you say, "but that costs money". Sure, but the real trick is to start by using low cost and virtually free services to stake your claim on the net.

Let me share some with you. Assume that we have enough money in our budget to afford a cheap internet service provider. We'll even go with one that doesn't offer space for our own website or email. Remember that we are looking for cheap or free services here.

We can't afford website authoring software or the cost of website hosting, so instead we'll use a website service that has free layouts and free space. And to make it easier, free email. One of the big ones is:

<http://au.geocities.yahoo.com>

Registering with Yahoo! is free and earns us space for our website and an email address. After a little bit of reading the "How to", we have our site "online" in minutes. Placing text on the site is easy. Adding photos takes a little more knowledge. But there are photos available on Yahoo! we will use until we learn how to upload our own.

Great, we have our site. How do we tell people that it's "online"? Answer: use the search engines. Most search engines have a link at the bottom of the page called "submit a site". This link allows us to submit our site to the search engine editors (sometimes real people) for consideration. Usually if our website description matches the type of website we submitted, it generally gains approval. It can take some time for our website to appear in the search engines, but we have no money to pay for a premium spot, and at least we now have a site to point our customers to for more information. There are also companies that will submit our site to many search engines for a fee, but that's not in our budget.

Search engines include:

<http://www.google.com.au>

<http://www.yahoo.com.au>

<http://www.webwombat.com.au>

<http://www.anzwers.com.au>

Now we need some general information about marketing and advice on small business. We've read all the books in the library, and we can't afford to keep buying best sellers from the bookstore. Instead, we head to the net:

Try:

<http://www.smallbiz.nsw.gov.au/>

<http://www.sbdc.com.au/>

<http://smallbusiness.ninemsn.com.au/>

<http://www.ozemail.com.au/sbguide/business.html>

You will be amazed at the amount of expert advice and insider information you can gain from such sites without spending a single cent. And to really blow your mind, type "Small Business" into one of the search engines mentioned earlier. You'll need to take a year off to read through all the results.

Let's now say our business in Australia has a number of North American clients, like my friend I mentioned earlier. A service called J2 will give us a free combined fax and voicemail number in the USA. That's right – FREE. Our clients can use that to save on international call charges. The faxes or voicemail messages are then delivered to us via our free email account we set up earlier. For a fee, we can upgrade our J2 service to an international toll free number, organise conference calls and hear our faxes or email over the phone.

More details on the J2 service:

<http://www.j2.com>

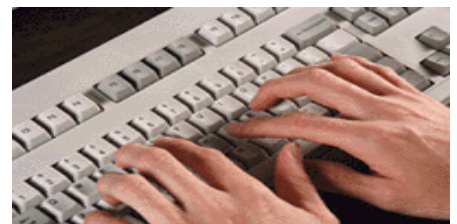
I might just mention a very popular form of net marketing. It's called "the loss leader". People who work in retail will know this term very well. It represents an offer you make to customers that returns no money, or may even cost you money, but it attracts prospects to your business who wouldn't otherwise be interested.

And yes, you can learn more at:

http://www.bizhelp24.com/marketing/loss_leader.shtml

The free J2 service is a loss leader, as are the free services provided by Yahoo! These sites make up the loss either via associated advertising packages or by successfully up-selling their prospects. The loss leader is a great tool so long as it doesn't break the budget and can be delivered with minimal time and outlay.

Next in this series, we'll look at book-keeping and saving (and cashing-in) on the telephony competition.



Tim Stackpool is a freelance Australian correspondent for radio stations around the world. No endorsement of these websites is intended & no payment or commission from the services mentioned in this article are received. Website details and services are correct at the time of publishing.
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