

Chapter 1

Creating an Online Presence for Your Business

In This Chapter

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 - ▶ Blogging for business
 - ▶ Understanding social media
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Today — with the world sending 35 billion e-mails a day, the Internet hosting 10 million websites, and e-commerce ringing up retail and travel sales in the billions and growing steadily — it's hard to remember that the Internet didn't even enter business conversation until the mid-1990s, and back then most discussions ended with more questions than answers.

The idea of NOT having a website, of NOT harnessing the power of the Internet to get, maintain, serve, and sell to customers is nearly unthinkable today. Many businesses depend on the Internet for some aspect of their business. Others would not be in business at all if it weren't for the Internet, and that number is growing every day.

This chapter takes you through the basics of creating a website and choosing the functionality you need to support your business. We look at ways to make money online including selling your own products and profiting from helping other businesses sell theirs. And we look at blogging and social media as ways to establish presence, create profile, and drive sales.

Putting a Website to Work for You

Whether you want your business's website to create corporate credibility or act as an area for customers to place and track orders and pay, most businesses today need a website.

As you embark on creating and launching your website, you must ensure you do the following:

- ✓ Define how prospects and customers will use your site.
- ✓ Define your goal for the site.
- ✓ Commit to the cost, including site construction, hosting, and support.
- ✓ Be ready to market your site.

Types of websites

Defining the purpose of a website is just like defining the purpose of any other business communication. You need to know whom you're trying to talk to, what people currently know or think about your business, what you *want* them to know or think, and, most of all, what action you want them to take after encountering this communication with your business.

Most business websites fall into one of three categories:

- ✓ **Contact and brochure sites:** These are promotional sites that tell who you are and what you do. These websites are the easiest and most economical to create and maintain. They allow prospects to find your business online, find out how to contact you, and find out information about your products or services.
- ✓ **Support sites:** These websites provide online customer service and communication. They offer information about product installation, usage, and troubleshooting; share industry trends and product update news; and help customers put products to use. Support sites also often include e-commerce components as well.
- ✓ **E-commerce sites:** The primary purpose of an e-commerce site is to sell goods online. Site visitors can view products, make choices, place orders, and submit payments.

Building your website

Unless you're a Web designer, turn to the pros for assistance in building a custom site for your business. This approach will cost you time and money — that's the downside. The upside is that you'll end up with a website that conveys your unique brand image, with a viewing and navigation system precisely tailored to your business, all built on a platform that can grow with your business.



If you do decide to create your own website, you can use templates provided by Internet hosting and site-development resources. An online search will result in hundreds of potential service providers who can provide templates at little or no cost.

Creating website content

As you prepare content that you want to appear on your website, use the following guidelines:



- ✓ Organize content into well-defined categories. A modular approach to presenting information works best. (See the section “website navigation” for examples of how to organize the content.)
- ✓ Limit the number of words you use and use short paragraphs and sentences. Online readers demand clarity and ease of use. Go for visibility over volume.
- ✓ Make the information easy to skim so readers can scan over the material and stop where and when they find what's pertinent to them.
- ✓ Communicate directly to your customer, anticipating what the customer is looking for and putting it where the customer will most likely look for it.
- ✓ Make the visit to your website worthwhile by delivering on the promise. For example, if the goal is to tell prospects about your company, provide names of satisfied clients, areas of expertise, and profiles of the team that will provide an experience equal to the prospect's expectation.

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Setting up website navigation



To help visitors get around your site, present them with clearly labelled selections. For example, labels such as Technical Support, Our Products, Our Customers, News, Contact Us, and Frequently Asked Questions tell people way more about what to expect — and are easier to read — than labels like Features, Information, What People Are Saying, or other more ambiguous descriptions. Keep these tips in mind as you develop your site navigation:

- ✓ Start with a home page that tells visitors exactly what you want them to know about your business — clearly and immediately.
- ✓ Let visitors jump from section to section and page to page with ease.
- ✓ Provide a link back to your home page from every page.
- ✓ Keep choices clear and to a minimum by creating a logical flow in the navigation. websites should rarely be exhaustive in their content. They should generally leave people wanting more — which they can get from you.
- ✓ Provide a site map so users can see how your site is organized.

Knowing the attributes of a good site

You know a good website when you get to it. You stay there and you get what you expect. You also know what happens when you get to a poorly designed or written website. You get off and go somewhere else fast.

Good websites have some common strengths:

- ✓ The purpose of the site is clear.
- ✓ The site immediately tells the visitor what the company is and what it does.
- ✓ The site is organized so visitors can easily find and access information.
- ✓ Visitors can quickly learn how to contact people at the business.
- ✓ The site comes up on all computers with different operating systems quickly and reliably.
- ✓ The site is easy to read and use.
- ✓ The look of the site creates a good impression of the business.
- ✓ The site doesn't crash or give error messages.
- ✓ The website's content is well written, clear, and directed at visitors' wants and needs.

Generating traffic to your website

Here are five ways to increase the amount of *traffic* (the number of visitors) a website sees, which virtually all businesses can benefit from:

- ✓ **Free search optimization:** Many search engines and directories don't require you to pay a fee to get listed. Google, MSN, and Yahoo! are good examples. Optimizing your site content can help you appear higher in search engine results and attract more visitors to your website, as Chapter 3 of this book explains.
- ✓ **Paid search:** With the growth of measurement tools (such as Google Analytics, for example), paid search has become an accepted and essential form of promotion for any product or service. You can put your banner ad or other content on someone else's website and pay them for the privilege as a monthly fee or by the number of visitors that come to you referred by that site.
- ✓ **Supplying content:** Just when you think every topic of content has been covered, new angles and opinions emerge. Supplying content to the Web through blogs (see the heading "Blogging" a bit later on in this chapter), really simple syndication (RSS), press releases, articles, and forums, and the growing surge of content pushing to cellphones are traffic-generating processes.
- ✓ **Offline efforts:** Don't overlook your opportunities to use offline resources to promote your website: radio interviews, networking, and public speaking are all good ways to build traffic.
- ✓ **Referrals:** Whether referrals come from offline or online, always strive to increase visitors who are referred by someone else. This means getting onto other business sites, perhaps by doing the same for them, or by paying for a presence on theirs.

Making Money Online

You can make money online in a variety of ways, and many tools and tactics are out there to help you mine the Internet for traffic and revenue.

The many ways to make money by using the Internet all fall into three main categories:

- ✓ Promoting affiliate products
- ✓ Monetizing traffic
- ✓ Developing and selling your own product or service

The following sections take a look at each category more closely.

Promoting affiliate products

An *affiliate product* is an item that another business produces, delivers, and supports. All you have to do is recommend that others visit that business's website. When someone makes a purchase through that website as a result of your recommendation, you get paid a sales commission.

A first source of affiliates could be products you have used yourself and were impressed with, such as software, a book, or other item. You may also find potential affiliates by doing an Internet search or using an affiliate aggregator such as ClickBank (www.clickbank.com)

Monetizing traffic

You can put ads for other products and services on your website and make money by essentially selling ad space on your site. If you can attract a significant number of website visitors (see “Generating traffic to your website” earlier in this chapter), you can turn that traffic into money — *monetize* — without promoting affiliate products or attempting to sell your own. Google AdSense ads and traditional banner ads cost per-click and are examples of monetizing traffic.

Developing your own online products and services

At first, the idea of developing your own online products and services seems to be the most profitable path, because you get to keep all the money. But this isn't always the case, especially in the short term. With affiliate programs (refer to the heading “Promoting affiliate products”), proven content is normally already provided for you, so ramp-up time is fast, and your investment is low. With monetizing traffic (see the previous section), the ads on your pages are commonly already tested and proven to work.

Creating and selling your own online products and services can prove to be the most challenging, because you have so much work to do before you can begin selling. However, creating your own product does give you creative control and long-term growth potential. Here are some points to remember when considering what types of online products or services you might create for sale on your website:

- ✔ **Information products are king.** An *information product* — which is essentially a product that provides information and that can be as simple as a how-to book — is still the easiest and least expensive product to produce and deliver. For example, your business may have developed a process or a software application that helps service your customers. You can create a document that outlines how to create and implement a similar product and then sell it on your website.
- ✔ **Audio is queen.** After you get started with audio, you will quickly realize the unlimited opportunity potential available by producing recorded products and promotional content. If you're a musician, selling downloads of your latest "album" is an obvious one. But you can also sell a series of downloadable material including interviews with experts, panel discussions, etc.
- ✔ **Video is hot, hot, hot!** Every website can enhance the buyer's experience by offering video, especially when a product is for sale. You can demonstrate how your software works and provide guidance in installing it. You can show people having fun at your club and dancing the night away. The video can be the product or the video can help sell your product.
- ✔ **Webinars are the ultimate education tool.** Webinars are online sessions that allow you to take people through your presentation or training session. This can happen in real time, with you at your computer and your clients/students at theirs, or the Webinar can be prerecorded for others to download and follow the program when and where they want.
- ✔ **One product can become a line of products.** For every information product you produce, you can create an entire product line by offering the nearly identical product in e-book form, MP3 audio recording, video, Webinars, and in-person seminar training.

Blogging

The word blog is a shortened form of Web log and has quickly become part of everyone's vocabulary. Essentially bloggers "post" their diaries, recipes, thoughts at large, editorials, photos, anything they want, and anything they believe people may want to read on line. As a small-business person you can use a blog, which may be part of your website or may be on a separate site (see "Introducing blogging tools" later in this chapter), to reinforce your knowledge and expertise with clients and potential clients, or to provide news that your readers may need for their business. If you have a website company you may want to blog about the latest developments or how to decide whether implementing a new technology is right for your customers, for example. Blogs can help you establish your credibility and draw people to using your services or buying your products.

Choosing a topic to blog about

If you're going to write a blog, you need a topic that you can write about regularly, and you have to have something to say about that topic that is meaningful to the readers you want to attract: customers and potential customers foremost. You might rate new products in your field, give tips on how to use a tool, or answer frequently asked questions.

Your goal is to reach the point where your audience seeks you out because you consistently offer information that they find helpful in light of their interests.



If you read nothing else in this section, read these key tips:

- ✓ Write about something that excites you.
- ✓ Write about something you know.

Stay focused and stay within your area of expertise. Here's why:

- ✓ Blogging requires a long-term commitment.
- ✓ Your audience won't hesitate to point out subject matter mistakes.
- ✓ Your audience knows if you don't know what you're talking about.

Consider what you do and then ask yourself these questions:

- ✓ How can I make my blog posts useful?
- ✓ How can I make this topic funny?
- ✓ How can I make this topic fascinating?
- ✓ What can I say about this topic that will prompt discussion?
- ✓ Which questions are asked repeatedly?



Here are a few ideas on choosing the right blogging topic that will attract the right followers and achieve your business objectives:

- ✓ **If you're a management consultant**, write a blog about applying your favorite time-management technique to midsize companies.
- ✓ **If you're a roofer**, create a question-and-answer blog for homeowners.
- ✓ **If you're a real estate agent**, blog about your favorite staging techniques.
- ✓ **If you're a freelance personal chef**, write about the best frozen foods with taste testing.
- ✓ **If you're a tutor**, come up with a daily list of homework tips.

Introducing blogging tools

Behind most blogs is a blogging tool: Blogger (www.blogspot.com), WordPress (<http://wordpress.com>), TypePad (www.typepad.com), and Movable Type (www.movabletype.com) are popular examples. Each requires an account, and some require you to download software. Others only require you to log in from the Web.

WordPress — the most popular self-hosted blog software, by far — can be downloaded at www.wordpress.org for free. Plus, it offers the easiest way to add affiliate links (see earlier in this chapter) to every post as well as include audio and video in posts.

Using Social Media

The term *social media* umbrellas any website or Web application that allows your audience to interact with your site and each other, directly or indirectly.

Social media sites and tools enable you to build your business's reputation and audience over time. Every friend you add on Facebook, every bookmark you add to StumbleUpon, and every tweet you post to Twitter increases your business's profile.

If you spend this capital wisely, you can use it to

- ✓ Announce a new product.
- ✓ Ask everyone for feedback about a new idea or blog post.
- ✓ Build some buzz and get others talking about your product or service — and your online presence.

Table 1-1 shows the seven basic categories of social media sites.

Table 1-1 Social Media Sites by Category		
<i>Social Media Type</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Blogs	Allow you to write, journal-style, and then invite comments from your readers	Blogger WordPress
Social networks	Where people can interact and connect online	Facebook Google+ LinkedIn Yammer MySpace

(continued)

Table 1-1 (continued)

<i>Social Media Type</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Bookmarking sites	Allow you to save bookmarks, just like you would in your browser, but on a site you can access from any computer	Delicious StumbleUpon
Microblogging sites	Allow you to blog one or two sentences at a time	Twitter Tumblr Plurk
Media sharing sites	Where you can upload and share video, audio, and photographs	YouTube Flickr
Popularity sites	Where you can collect bookmarks and then let visitors vote on them	Digg Reddit
Aggregators	Help the truly social and connected keep up with all this stuff	FriendFeed



Social media, more than any other vehicle, has the potential to spread a message far and fast.

You also need to know what sites are social media hot spots and what each site's specialty is so you can successfully use social media to spread the word about your products or services online.

The following sections explain the top three categories of social media and explore the benefits so you can begin to formulate a social media strategy for your business.

Connecting via social networks

All social networking sites offer a rare opportunity to spread the word about yourself or your business to thousands or even millions of people. Facebook, MySpace, and hundreds (if not thousands) of other sites all qualify as social networks.

At their simplest, social networks offer you — and your online presence — a great opportunity to

- ✓ Get a feel for your potential customers
- ✓ Get advice from colleagues
- ✓ Demonstrate your expertise

Here is a list of social networks that you should be familiar with. They've been around for a while, have thousands or millions of users, and offer access to the widest audience:

- ✓ **Facebook:** This is the dominant site today. Facebook (www.facebook.com) allows you to create your own profile pages, send messages to other members, and make “friends” with them by adding fellow members to your friends list. You can join for free by creating an account in just a few minutes.
- ✓ **LinkedIn:** A members-only network for businesspeople. Businesspeople worldwide can connect with you based on common interests, previous work together, or networking groups. Members can create networks of literally hundreds of people.
- ✓ **Yahoo! Answers:** Have a question? Visit <http://answers.yahoo.com>. Thousands of helpful members offer answers to questions on topics ranging from Internet marketing to wedding planning to pet care.
- ✓ **Discussion forums:** Forums are still out there. Sites like WebmasterWorld.com (www.webmasterworld.com) and Google Groups (<http://groups.google.com>) are basically enormous collections of discussion threads where you create your membership and then join the fray. Most discussion forums are free to join.

Microblogging

Microblog sites allow members to make lots of short — often less than 140 characters — blog posts. Microblogs are fast, easy, and can be updated from a cellphone, computer, or even via voice mail.

Microblogs look and feel more like old-fashioned chat rooms than blogs. Participants post statements, which are visible in a common *public timeline*, which everyone can see and read.



You might think that microblogging is just like a social network, but microblogs tend to be more “real time,” with some participants posting every few minutes. So they allow for more of an ongoing conversation. But yes, the lines do get blurry at times.

More importantly, participants can follow fellow microbloggers whom they find interesting. After you make friends on a microblog, you follow them, and they follow you. Then their friends see you and follow you, and so on. On most microblogs, you mark people as friends by clicking Friend, or Follow. Then they confirm, and you're friends. It's that easy.

Therefore, microblogging is a great way to build a focused audience to which you can pose questions, make suggestions, or announce a new blog post.

Twitter (<http://twitter.com>) is by far the prominent microblogging tool with which you can enter 140-character messages. By following other people you find interesting, you'll receive their messages. Think of it as a huge chat room that remembers what you said. It's free to join. Like most social networks, you create a simple identity and can start posting right away.

Media sharing sites

Media sharing sites allow you to upload videos, photographs, and audio to a single directory. Then visitors can browse through and see your masterpiece. If you've been online in the last few years, you know a few of these sites. Here are two examples:

- ✓ **YouTube:** This is the biggest video-sharing site out there. Upload your video (ten minutes or less), and visitors can view and comment on it. Garnering more views and favourites ratings moves you up in the directory. Whole careers have been launched on YouTube (www.youtube.com). YouTube is free and lets you upload video in a wide array of formats.
- ✓ **Flickr:** Use Flickr (www.flickr.com) to upload and manage photographs. You can divide them into groups, organize them by tags, and restrict access as desired. Flickr also lets you publish your photos individually or as a "stream" on other websites. Flickr supports video, as well.

As a small business with an online presence, you can post your videos, photos, and illustrations on these sites. They're not magical marketing tools, but the right content at the right time can get you hundreds, thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of new visitors. That's why you want to put your photos and videos on third-party sites: They get a lot of traffic and put you in front of an enormous audience.