

Chapter 1

New Tools and Strategies for Your Online Business

In This Chapter

- ▶ Reaching potential customers on mobile devices
 - ▶ Opening your business to customer input and participation
 - ▶ Taking advantage of new funding opportunities
 - ▶ Creating a website “home base” that you can expand
 - ▶ Marketing your products and services with social media
 - ▶ Expanding your e-commerce operation by opening multiple storefronts
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New technologies and ways of shopping and selling are always popping up in the world of online commerce. One of the biggest new developments is the proliferation of devices like the ones in your own pocket or on your work table. Buyers — the people you want to connect with online — are finding new ways to shop and make purchases. Consumers can shop wherever they are in the world. They’re surfing with small screens, using mobile apps, and taking charge of the e-commerce experience more than ever before.

At the same time, those who seek to start or grow an online business have new opportunities to help them along. They can get help from the same engaged customers with whom they engage on social marketing sites like Facebook and Twitter. They can find the funding they need by turning to new resources like Kickstarter. And they can follow the example of the many ambitious small business owners who are triangulating their business processes — using websites, social media, and storefronts to connect with customers from many different angles.

Keeping up with all the new trends in online commerce is getting harder because it's a constantly moving target. This chapter gives you an overview of some of the many new and exciting ways to conduct e-commerce. If you've heard about e-commerce before and weren't attracted by the thought of creating a website and sales catalog, take a look at these innovative options for generating revenue.

E-Commerce Is Goin' Mobile

As I was working on this chapter, I covered eBay's Analyst Day event, in which eBay describes the trends it is seeing in e-commerce and made projections about future growth. CEO John Donahoe focused his opening remarks on the rise of mobile commerce.

Consumers now shop with smartphones in hand in brick-and-mortar stores. They compare prices and research the products they see in front of them. They don't always follow through and make purchases with their mobile devices. But more and more shoppers throughout the world are going through the purchase process on the small screen. But you can increase the chances that they will, as described in the sections that follow.



eBay reported \$13 billion in sales volume in 2012; that represents 13.5 percent of its entire volume of \$175 billion. The company projects that its mobile commerce figures will grow 20 percent annually through 2015. Find out more at www.ebayinc.com/investor_relations/analyst_day_2013.

Designing for the small screen

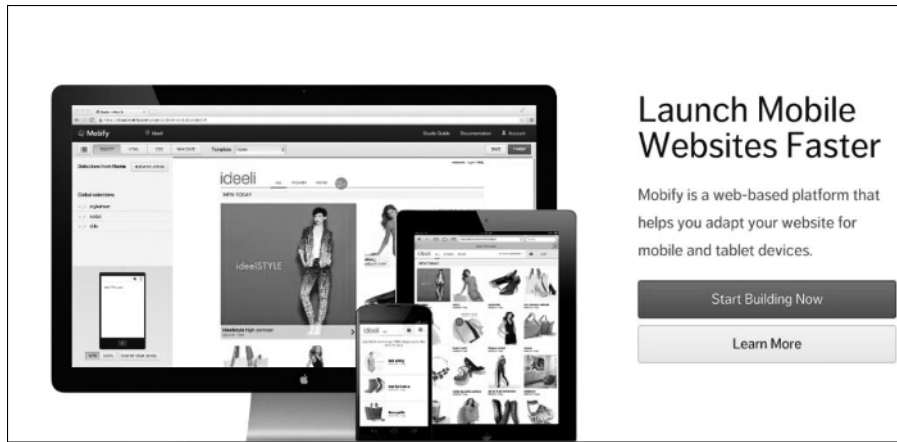
The first way to attract mobile shoppers is to make sure your website or online store loads quickly and is easy to navigate. For big companies that have their own IT and web design staff, that means adapting the site they've designed to appear on a big desktop monitor so that it works on a 5-inch or smaller smartphone screen.

If you don't have a designer on staff, you can get your own mobile site by signing up with a hosting service that provides you one for free. You can also turn to a company like Mobify (www.mobify.com), which specializes in creating mobile sites for online sellers. Three versions of one home page are shown in the image on Mobify's home page, shown in Figure 1-1.



See Chapter 19 for ten ways to reach mobile shoppers.

Figure 1-1:
Make sure
your web-
site or store
is adapted
for mobile
users.



Selling mobile, selling local: Two examples

There are many ways to sell online, but some of the newest involve mobile technology and reaching local customers online. Here are just two examples of entrepreneurs who are taking advantage of these approaches.

Lisa Bettany, a professional photographer (not a programmer), spent a year and a half creating an app for the iPhone called Camera+. She was pretty much destitute while she was doing this. She hired a programmer to help make her idea a reality. Since it was released, she has generated \$4 million by selling 4 million of her apps in iTunes and other locations. You can find more about Lisa at www.MostlyLisa.com.

What if you aren't technologically savvy, but you have a great deal of knowledge, even passion, for a particular subject? Dean Pettit was a worker for NASA in Florida when he

was laid off. He loves the outdoors, especially the area called the Space Coast. He created an aggregation website called Space Coast Outdoors (www.spacecoastoutdoors.net), which collects information about a single topic in one place so it's easy to find. It's the kind of aggregation of information that has worked since Yahoo! started back in the 1990s.

You're probably wondering how this kind of site makes money when all you're providing is information. You build as much traffic as you can, and when you get to a certain number of visitors, you can start to sell ads.

Dean Pettit isn't getting rich from his site, at least not yet. But the extra spending money helps while he's between day jobs, and he's hoping to build enough monthly income so eventually he won't need a day job.

Facilitating purchases and searches

You need to list yourself where mobile shoppers hang out. Make sure you're on the local directory Google Places for Business (www.google.com/business/placesforbusiness) and places like the review site Yelp (www.yelp.com), for example. List your products on venues like eBay Local Shopping (www.ebay.com/local). People love to look up reviews on their mobile devices, so make sure you're there.

Mobile commerce is also about making it easy for shoppers to tap the Buy button on their touch screens. Here again, the choice of service provider is critical. Some specifically focus on making shopping and purchasing as easy as possible for mobile buyers.

Find out more about organizing both desktop and mobile websites in Chapter 5.



Businesses Processes Are Becoming Social

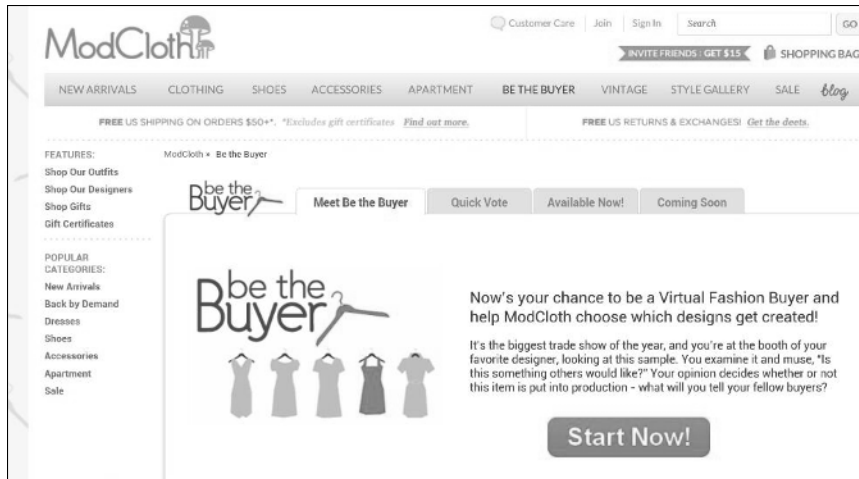
Those who believe in political or human rights know the power a group of people can have. In the online business world, some forward-looking companies have enlisted the participation of the “crowd.”

I'm not talking about using social marketing sites like Facebook to build brand loyalty and boost sales. (That subject is discussed in Chapter 13, by the way.) Rather, these innovative companies are letting customers participate in the process of manufacturing and designing products.

Choosing merchandise with customers' help

At the women's vintage and retro clothing site ModCloth (www.modcloth.com), enthusiastic buyers use their smartphones and an internal app developed by the company to provide real-time feedback on how much they like sweaters, other clothing, and accessories that have just been made. The site invites users to “be the buyer,” as shown in Figure 1-2.

Figure 1-2:
ModCloth
makes
buying deci-
sions based
on user
ratings.



ModCloth can gauge the sentiment of its customer base within minutes and use that information to do strategic purchasing. If the clothing vendor is in its facility while the feedback is being registered, ModCloth can tell the vendor immediately whether it wants an item, and whether it wants to purchase 50, 100, or 500 of that item.

Instead of making such decisions by intuition or by the gut feeling of a few sample shoppers, ModCloth can back up such decisions with user data. The community has even suggested new dress designs and new colors for sweat-ers, for example.

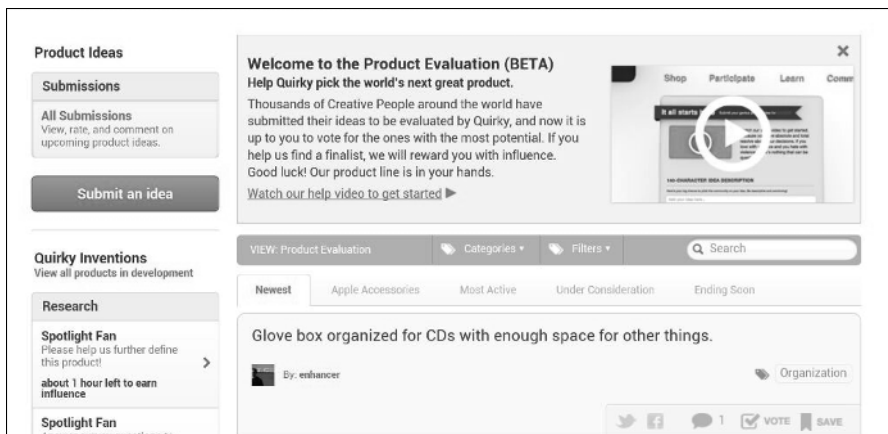


The coupon and deal company RetailMeNot (www.retailmenot.com) was developed in part on recommendations from community members who suggested deals, coupons, and other ways to save money on shopping.

Bringing end-users into the development process

At Quirky (www.quirky.com), the user community participates in many critical aspects of creating new products for sale. Customers submit ideas for products; they vote on and rate one another's products, as shown in Figure 1-3; they name items; they even photograph products. The company can get merchandise online that much quicker because of the use of crowdsourcing.

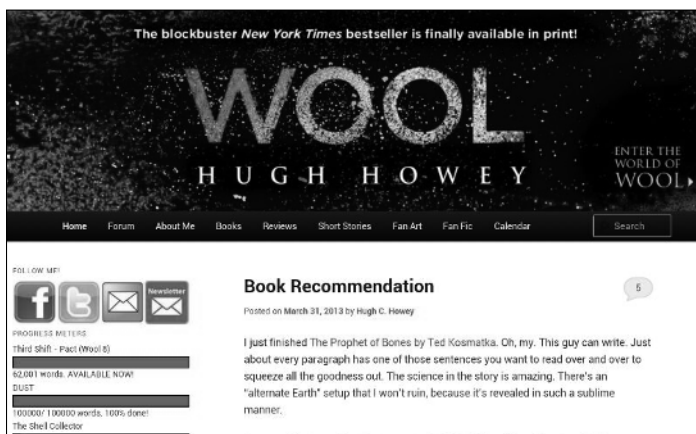
Figure 1-3:
Quirky
brings
crowd-
sourcing
into product
development.



Bringing the “crowd” into your operations is among the latest and most exciting developments as I write this edition of *Starting an Online Business For Dummies*. It goes beyond selling merchandise. Author Hugh Howey (www.hughhowey.com) brings his audience into the process of writing his highly popular series of novels. He expanded his bestselling *Wool* from a story to a novel because readers urged him for more. He wrote the novel as a serial, releasing a bit at a time, and responding to feedback as he went along. He encourages others to write “fan fiction” based on his work.

Howey himself participates in a huge reader community he has created on his website. On his home page (which doubles as his blog, as shown in Figure 1-4), he posts progress bars showing how far along he is with writing his books.

Figure 1-4:
This author
involves his
readers in
his writing
process.



Howey has created his own platform — the ultimate goal for authors and businesspeople alike, and a subject explored in Chapter 20.

Venture Capital Is Social, Too

You've probably already heard one of the success stories coming out of a crowd-funding website called Kickstarter (www.kickstarter.com). According to Business Insider (www.businessinsider.com/kickstarter-success-stories-2013-1), in 2012 about 18,000 projects were funded on this site by people who contributed \$320 million. Here are some examples:

- ✓ Pebble, a watch that uses Bluetooth to connect to a smartphone, received \$10.3 million (its developers originally sought \$100,000).
- ✓ Singer Amanda Palmer raised more than \$1.1 million to fund her new album, art book, and tour after breaking from her record label.
- ✓ Two MIT Media Lab researchers raised \$2.9 million to create an “affordable, professional 3-D printer.”

As venture capitalist Josh Goldman of Northwest Venture Partners said in an interview on EcommerceBytes in 2012 (www.ecommercebytes.com/cab/abn/y12/m08/i27/s01), venture capital is more readily available now than it was five or ten years ago for those with good ideas and a well-developed plans for an online businesses. Goldman suggested sites like AngelList (<https://angel.co>) for matching investors whose area of focus meshes with what you want to do.

Small, mom-and-pop businesses can secure venture capital just like high-tech startups. Capital Access Network (CAN) targets small- and medium-size businesses for funding. Most grants are for \$500 to \$1,000, although they can go up to \$250,000.



Indiegogo (www.indiegogo.com) also provides funding to individuals and businesses in search of funds. Kabbage (www.kabbage.com) specializes in providing loans and cash advances to small online business owners. Typically, the financing costs between 2 and 7 percent of the loan amount, according to the company.

Triangulating for Business Success

One trend I've been following in recent years is the rise of online businesses that sell through three venues:

- ✓ A website as your “home base”
- ✓ A presence on social media sites, most notably Facebook and Twitter, to connect with potential customers and keep up with your fans, friends, and buyers
- ✓ One or more online storefronts on sites like eBay, Amazon, Bonanza, eCRATER, or Etsy

Together, these three components of an online business combine to drive traffic to one another and to drive customers to your website. The fact is, a single store or standalone website is not enough. I’ve been covering e-commerce since the 1990s, and when I started out, someone with a great idea or a terrific product could make a killing with one website. It’s not quite as easy these days. There is so much competition, and so many people have become so sophisticated about marketing, that the most successful entrepreneurs are triangulating these three components.

Maintaining a presence in all these sites is a lot of work, to be sure, but the rewards include a better search engine placement and increased sales. The following sections explore this trend and how you can take advantage of it.

Creating a home page that’s a “home base”

There are more ways than ever before to pop up online, especially when you consider resources like Twitter, YouTube, and the photo-sharing site Pinterest. But the thing that ties all these together is still a website.

If there’s a trend pertaining to websites in 2013, it’s the merger of websites with blogs. For many people, their website *is* their blog. That’s the case with my own website (www.gregholden.com). It’s run on the blogging site WordPress, which enables anyone to not only create a blog, but also design web pages and post photos and other contents. Business sites that sell products are a natural fit with blogs, too.

Creating a blog to support your business is a powerful way of reaching potential customers and strengthening connections with current ones. The word-of-mouth marketing that results from successful blog publishing is effective while also being cost-effective: Advertising costs are miniscule compared to a traditional marketing effort.

What’s the first step in creating a blog? I usually advocate thinking before clicking. Think about the kind of blog you want to create. An article titled “Create a Blog to Boost Your Business” in *Entrepreneur* magazine describes several different types of blogs created by Denali Flavors to promote its

Moose Tracks line of ice cream flavors. Each blog took a different approach to promoting the same product:

- ✓ **Entertainment:** The blog *Moosetopia* is (or was; it was discontinued but is still online) written by the Moose Tracks Moose, the product mascot.
- ✓ **Useful advice:** The blog *Free Money Finance* provides something that everyone needs — advice on how to handle their money. The connection to the product is a “sponsored by” Moose Tracks ice cream logo to the right of the blog, as shown in Figure 1-5.
- ✓ **Public relations:** Another blog, *Team Moose Tracks*, concerns efforts of the company’s cycling team to raise money for an orphanage in Latvia. It reflects positively on the company and the brand.
- ✓ **Behind the scenes:** A fourth blog, *Denali Flavors*, takes a look at what goes on in the company.

The article (www.entrepreneur.com/article/80100-2) reports that site visits went up 25.7 percent after the blogs went online; the company spent less than \$700 on all four blogs, too. You can take any or all of these approaches in your own blog, depending on the product you’re trying to sell and your available resources. If you’re selling a “fun” product, you might decide to take the entertainment approach; if you work for a big company, you might take the behind-the-scenes approach.

Figure 1-5:

This is just one of several blogs created by the people who make Moose Tracks ice cream.



After you have a general idea of the approach you want to take, it’s time to get started. The first step is to choose your blog host. You don’t necessarily have to pay to do this; most of the best-known blog hosts offer hosting for free. They include

- ✓ **Blogger** (www.blogger.com) doesn't have as many features as other blog utilities, but it's free.
- ✓ **WordPress** (www.wordpress.com) is software you download and install to create and manage your blog. WordPress offers free hosting for blogs and is very popular; find out more in the latest edition of *WordPress For Dummies*, by Lisa Sabin-Wilson.
- ✓ **TypePad** (www.typepad.com) has lots of features, but it costs anywhere from \$8.95 to \$29.95 per month. The Unlimited plan, at \$14.95 per month, should be sufficient for most online business owners.

Take some time to look at other business blogs and examine how they use type and color. Often, for a purely personal blog, it doesn't matter whether it's carefully designed. But for a blog that has a business purpose, you need to make it look professional.

Next, determine who will do the blogging. You may not want to do it all yourself. If you can gather two or three contributors, you increase the chances that you can post entries on a daily basis, which is important for blogs. That way, if someone needs time off, you'll have backup contributors available.

When you configure your blog, no matter which host you choose, the main features tend to be more or less the same. Figure 1-6 shows the Clean Air Gardening Blog, one of the many blogs created by expert marketer Lars Hundley, whom I profile in the sidebar "Blogs plant seeds, gardening business blooms," later in this chapter. The blog includes some Google AdSense ads to drum up extra revenue; a link for visitors to post comments; categories that organize past blog posts; a chronological archive of posts; and links to other relevant sites, including Hundley's main Clean Air Gardening website (www.cleanairgardening.com).



For detailed instructions on how to create a business blog, turn to *Buzz Marketing with Blogs For Dummies*, by Susannah Gardner.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of blogging isn't actually creating the blog, but maintaining it. Developing a schedule in which you publish regular blog posts is important. It's also important to measure how many visits your blog and your business website get so that you can measure results. Be sure to do a benchmark test — a test done before a process or procedure that gives you baseline data — so that you can judge results afterward. Adjust your site as needed to attract more visitors, but remember to stay on topic so that you don't drive away the audience you already have.

A business website needs to have the elements described in Chapter 5; an overview follows.

Figure 1-6:
Make your
blog attrac-
tive, well
organized,
and
interactive.



Domain name

You need a domain name: something short and catchy that you can register with a domain name registrar, one of the companies that keeps track of such things, like GoDaddy (www.godaddy.com). Your name can suggest what you sell, but it doesn't have to. It can be a word that doesn't necessarily mean anything, like Skype, the videoconferencing service, or Timbuk2 (www.timbuk2.com), the shoulder-bag company that took off because of the Internet. One of the biggest sellers on eBay used to be called Inflatable Madness, for example. The name is so nutty that you tend to remember it.

Logo

When you're surfing a succession of web pages that seem to flash by on your monitor like stores passing through a car window, you need a landmark or indicator that lets you know what's there for you. On the street, you scan signs. On the Internet, you look at logos.

A logo gives visitors an indication, in a single glance, of what your business is all about. It's an essential part of your online identity and something you can carry through to your Facebook page and other sites where you have a presence. Ultimately, they'll help you to build a platform, a subject covered in Chapter 20. You'll find out more about logos in Chapter 5.

Hosting service

In exchange for a monthly or yearly fee, a website host gives you space on a web server, a computer that is always connected to the Internet and is reliable and fast. You share the server with other businesses (although you can pay more and get your own server if you want a really fast connection). You *upload* (or move) your photos and web page files from your computer to the server, and you are given an address or URL so everyone can find them.

Beyond that, a host can do a lot more. It's helpful to break hosting services into two general types: a general website host and an e-commerce host, sometimes called a shopping cart service.

Shopping cart

At the core of the store is a shopping cart: a utility that makes it easy for you to create individual product listings that include photos, descriptions, and a button labeled Buy Now or Add to Cart. A shopping cart also gives you:

- ✓ A secure server
- ✓ A payment method
- ✓ Search engine optimization (SEO), a way of improving your placement in search engine results, as well as your marketing
- ✓ Consultation on your store/business

A shopping cart generally costs more than a general website host. Volusion (www.volusion.com), for example, offers five different hosting packages ranging from \$49 to \$149 per month. But the consultation, customer support, and marketing assistance offered by shopping cart packages makes them well worth the expense, especially when you're just starting out.

Design

You don't always need to hire a designer, especially if you sell on Amazon.com, where design hardly matters and you place only brief product listings. Some e-commerce hosting services provide templates that you can adapt to your own site. (A *template* is a predesigned web page that you can fill with your own words and images. You don't have to do any design.) Since you're just starting out and are on a shoestring, sign up with a host and use its templates to get your site started. Once you get some income flowing, you might want to hire someone to create a distinctive design and help you with more advanced store features.

Promotions

Whether you're selling products on a blog or promoting your services, your goal is to entice visitors to click your website, explore it, stay for as long as possible, and come back on a regular basis. You want your website or your store to have a "stickiness" factor. Promotions can go a long way toward making your site sticky. These include

- ✓ Coupons
- ✓ Sales
- ✓ Free shipping
- ✓ Deals for returning customers

Free shipping is a big deal on the web. Studies have shown that people are more likely to click the Add to Cart or Buy button if they don't have to pay for shipping — even if the price is higher because you, the seller, have built the shipping cost into the price. This is controversial. On eBay, sellers get a higher seller rating if they offer free shipping. But with the higher price, you become less competitive compared to other sellers who might be offering similar items. You might consider doing an experiment and offering some items with free shipping as a promotion, and see what happens.

How do you create these kinds of promotions? That's where the choice of shopping cart service becomes critical; it can help you with creating and distributing such deals.

Once you have a website in place, you can branch out to link it to other promotional sites, videos, or photo collections, just as entrepreneur Lars Hundley does in the nearby sidebar. Or you might open storefronts and social media sites as described in the sections that follow.

Connecting with customers via social marketing

When I wrote the first edition of this book back in 1998, you could advertise your online business in a few ways: through a website, through postings on online discussion boards, through placing banner ads, and by exchanging links to other sites. Now you can do *viral marketing* (word-of-mouth advertising) on social networking sites.

Blogs plant seeds, gardening business blooms

Lars Hundley is an expert with blogs, photo-sharing, and social networking sites to market his products. His Dallas, Texas-based business, Clean Air Gardening (www.cleanairgardening.com), posted sales of \$1.2 million in 2012, down from \$1.5 million in 2006. A site related to the main one, the yo-yo site Yoyoplay.com, posted sales of \$750,000 and \$500,000 in sales came from listings on Amazon.com. "Amazon and its shipping prices on oversized items like composters and rain barrels are killing us!" commented Hundley. But he continues to market multiple websites enthusiastically with the optimism of the successful entrepreneur.

Products occasionally receive the attention of traditional media. A few years ago, for example, Clean Air Gardening was mentioned in *The New York Times* as well as on *Good Morning America*.

Hundley uses a variety of blogs and online video sites to promote his Clean Air Gardening online business:

- ✓ **Practical Environmentalist** (www.practicalenvironmentalist.com): This blog isn't branded for Clean Air Gardening or directly linked to the company, but it is intended to attract the same kind of environmentally aware person who is its typical customer. This blog is more a free service than it is a hard-selling kind of blog.
- ✓ **Reel Mowers** (www.reelmowers.org): This blog bills itself as the ultimate guide to reel push lawn mowers.
- ✓ **Compost guide** (www.compostguide.com): This blog promotes several different companies. It's designed to generate a lot of composting-related educational information as well as keyword-rich pages and product promotion pages that give Air Gardening a growing body of search engine-friendly composting content over time.

✓ **Flash-based video on Clean Air Gardening:** Flash-based video helps sell products. Hundley films the videos with his Canon PowerShot S1 digital camera, which also shoots video. Then he edits them with his Mac mini and converts them to Flash so that people can watch them with their web browser directly on the page. One example is at www.cleanairgardening.com/patdesaustum.html.

✓ **Videos on YouTube.com:** Hundley uploads videos so that he doesn't have to pay for the bandwidth. Then he embeds the YouTube video on his product page. That also allows people to find the products on the YouTube site and click through to Clean Air Gardening. "When we add a video to a web page, we can increase our conversion rate for that product by up to 20 percent," comments Hundley. Find the company's videos at www.youtube.com/cleanairgardening.

✓ **Product and testimonial photos at Flickr:** Hundley puts his customer testimonial photos on Flickr and links to them from his testimonials page on his website. People can access these photos directly on Flickr (www.flickr.com/photos/cleanairgardening). They can then use a link to return to the Clean Air Gardening page.

"If you're thinking about starting your own Internet business, just do it!", says Hundley. "Start a small site and do it in your spare time to test the waters. I kept my day job for the first year when I started this business, until it started to take off and make money. Now, 11 years later, it is a multimillion-dollar-a-year company with 14 employees and a large, 14,000-square-foot warehouse and office. You can do it too, if you try!"

Social networking sites are the modern-day equivalent of the town square. When you go to a social networking site, you strike up a personal relationship with a merchant; after you do, you're that much more likely to buy something from that person. Social networking sites give potential customers another place where they can find you and get to know you. The best-known sites are

- ✓ **Twitter** (www.twitter.com)
- ✓ **Facebook** (www.facebook.com)
- ✓ **MySpace** (www.myspace.com)
- ✓ **Pinterest** (www.pinterest.com)

If you want to reach a younger generation of consumers, places like Pinterest and Facebook are among the best ways to find them. If you sell services that depend on personal contact with a customer, such as a group of musicians that plays for weddings or a wedding planner, people sometimes hire you as much for your personality and personal approach as for your actual work. In these kinds of fields, social networking sites are even more important.



Another networking site, LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), lets you build a network of business contacts who can get in touch with one another and build a community.

Facebooking your business

Facebook wasn't started with the idea of business in mind. It is primarily a site where you connect with friends, family, and others on a regular basis. You sign up for a Facebook account and create a page where you post information about yourself and (optionally) a photo. You then decide whether that information is available to the public at large or only to people you invite to see it. That's the nice thing about Facebook: You control who communicates with you because you "invite" or "approve" them as needed. If you are approached by someone you don't know, you simply decline to approve that person's access.

For me, Facebook is a terrific way to keep in touch with friends I don't see often enough and family members who live far away. Recently, I used Facebook to write a story that I share with my Facebook friends. I write an episode of the story on my blog and then announce it via Facebook. One of these announcements is shown in Figure 1-7.

As often happens, this popular online resource has become a place to do business for a few early adopters. With more than 1 billion registered users, 60+ percent of whom log in every day, it's a natural for businesspeople to advertise themselves and even offer items for sale.

Figure 1-7:
You can use
Facebook
to keep in
touch or
promote a
story or a
cause.



The statistics about Facebook come from the site itself: newsroom.fb.com/Key-Facts.

A marketplace for artists called ArtFire (www.artfire.com) allows its members to display items from its sales catalogs on their Facebook pages. Not only that, but if you shop in one of these Facebook “kiosks,” you can make a purchase there without having to go to ArtFire or another site. The utility is available to ArtFire members as part of their \$12.95 per month hosting fee. In Chapter 13, you can read about one enterprising seller who’s sold items through Facebook.

Tweeting for fun and profit

Twitter is a true Internet phenomenon. It distinguishes itself from other social networking sites by limiting users to posting comments that contain no more than 140 characters. Despite this restriction, many businesspeople as well as public figures have latched on to Twitter as a convenient and simple way to spread the word about anything. That includes senators posting “tweets” about upcoming votes in Congress, Sarah Palin talking about herself, and stars like Ashton Kutcher (Twitter name: @aplusk), who at this writing has 14 million people around the world “following” his Twitter posts. Every time he posts a tweet, 14 million people get the message.

With that kind of platform, anyone can promote him- or herself or a business online. Kutcher, to his credit, regularly promotes social change and peace. But my colleague Ina Steiner, who runs a website called EveryPlaceI Sell, uses

Twitter as a platform for sellers. Sellers regularly post tweets about sales and promotions. See Chapter 13 for more.

Blogging to build your business

In the late 1990s, web pages were where it was at as far as e-commerce goes. As of this writing, the blog is the tool of choice for many online entrepreneurs. On the surface, a blog doesn't seem like something that can make you money. A *blog* is a web page, but one that is updated frequently with content to which readers can quickly respond with comments. Many blogs take the form of an online diary: a running commentary that the blogger adds to as often as possible — every few days, every day, or perhaps even several times a day.

Blogs do make money, however. When you have a dependable number of viewers, you can generate revenue from your blog by using these methods:

- ✓ **Placing ads:** You can use a service such as Blogads (www.blogads.com) or Google's AdSense (adsense.google.com).
- ✓ **Placing affiliate ads:** You sign up for well-known programs that steer potential buyers to Amazon.com or eBay.
- ✓ **Building interest in your website:** By talking about yourself, your knowledge, or your services, you encourage customers to commit to them.



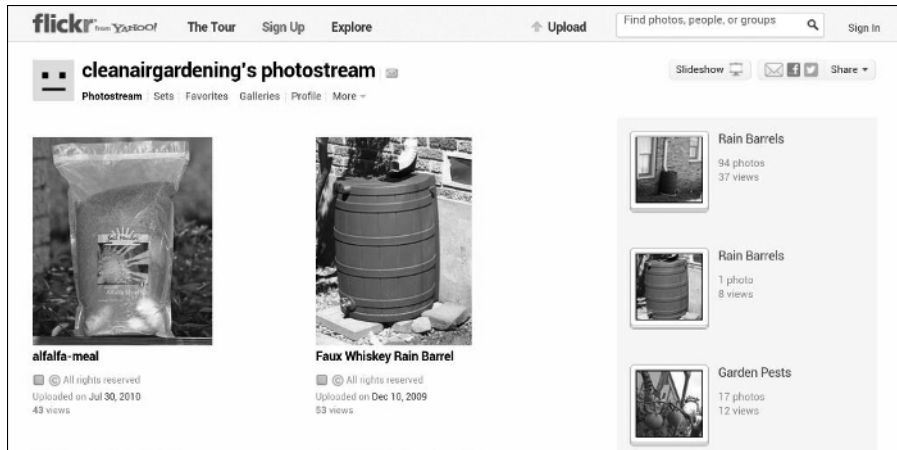
See Chapter 13 for more about blogs and how they can help your business.

Sharing your work with Flickr

If you're lucky, your products sell themselves. But for some products, photos are a necessity. If you have a big piece of furniture, such as a couch or a rare antique or a work of art, a description that consists solely of words just doesn't cut it. Photos give you a real selling point. You can post photos on your own website, of course. But the cool and trendy place for them to appear is at the popular photo-sharing site Flickr (www.flickr.com).

Flickr is free and easy to use. I can't think of a better business use for the site than the Clean Air Gardening customer photos, shown in Figure 1-8. Lars Hundley (whom I profile in the sidebar earlier in this chapter) invites his customers to submit photos of the products they've purchased, such as push reel lawn mowers and weathervanes.

Figure 1-8:
Use photo-sharing sites to publish photos of your products in action.



Diversifying sales with multiple storefronts

An online storefront is a site you don't own yourself. It's one you set up with a marketplace that charges you a monthly fee for e-commerce hosting. The e-commerce hosts I mention in the previous sections let you set up your own website. The ones I mention in this section are marketplaces. Some marketplaces, like eBay and Amazon, let you sell all kinds of merchandise. Others are set up for people who sell a particular kind of item. They attract people who are looking for just that kind of item:

- ✓ **Etsy** (www.etsy.com) is set up for handmade arts and crafts.
- ✓ **Ruby Lane** (www.rubylane.com) is for antiques and collectibles.
- ✓ **AbeBooks** (www.abebooks.com) is for used books; this is where all those booksellers you used to see around are going now.
- ✓ **Planet Diecast** (www.planetdiecast.com) is for, as you might expect, diecast toys.
- ✓ **iOffer** (www.ioffer.com) gives buyers the chance to make an offer for what you have to sell.

Some storefronts don't focus on any particular type of sales items; they are general interest marketplaces. Some of the most popular are eCRATER and Bonanza. They are popular alternatives for people who are looking for an alternative to eBay in particular, who want lower fees and fewer regulations.

After you go through the effort of creating your own website, why should you open another storefront on someone else's site and pay another rental fee? It's not something you have to do right away. You might want to get one store up and running and get some income flowing before you open a second one.

The big thing a storefront does is give you a ready-made source of potential customers. A site like eBay, with its many millions of visitors a month, is bound to bring attention to your sales catalog. In fact, most people, when they start an online business, start with a site like eBay, not their own website. A storefront in a marketplace can also:

- ✓ Get your business up and running quickly.
- ✓ Give you other shoppers you can talk to and consult (that is, a user community).
- ✓ Supplement a website.
- ✓ Give you more customers.
- ✓ Give your customers a trustworthy way to buy from you.
- ✓ Come with a shopping cart/shipping system/payment plan.

People who might be reluctant to buy from your website, or who might not find your website, might be more likely to find you in a big, well-known marketplace that attracts millions of customers each day. If you're just starting out, it's a great idea to set up a store with one of the big players. These sites might have lots of rules and they cut into your profits with their fees, but they bring you more customers, too. Once you have customers, you can keep communicating with them to purchase on your website, where you get to keep all the profits.



Find out more about opening storefronts on eBay and Amazon.com in Chapter 14.

Partnering with a service provider

Many sellers who want to maximize their sales volume to the highest degree possible decide to sign up with high-powered professional business services to help them manage multiple online stores.

Moving from doing all the work yourself to signing up with a service provider is like the difference between cleaning your own house and hiring a cleaning service to do the work for you. You do have to pay for a cleaning service, but you'll have less stress in the long run.

By signing up with a company, such as ChannelAdvisor (www.channeladvisor.com) or Infopia (www.infopia.com), you can not only create an online store, but also get help with publicizing it and conducting transactions.



You don't have to be a beginner to align with one of these marketing companies. One of the best online sellers I know, David Yaskulka of Blueberry Boutique (www.blueberryboutique.net), signed up with ChannelAdvisor, and he already knows a lot about marketing and selling online.

See Chapter 16 for more about services that help businesspeople manage multiple sales channels.