



Building your Online Business

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Begin setting up a website, mobile presence, and storefront with e-commerce support

Building your Online Business

The Basic Elements

Once your business plan is in place, it's time to start getting things done. Here is a checklist of the basic items that you will need to develop.

Creating Your Brand

Your online brand has four essential elements:

- Your company name
- Your domain name
- Your slogan
- Your logo

First, develop your company name. It should reflect who you are, be easy to pronounce, and be easy to remember. Be sure to do a copyright and legal search to make sure that no other businesses are incorporated under that name.

Before finalizing your company name, you should also consult a domain registrar to identify what domain names (Internet addresses) are available. For an online business, a domain name that is easy to remember and type is especially important. Consider using an alternative top-level domain like .biz or .info if the .com version is taken. As of this writing, top-level domain names are becoming more diverse and experts are predicting that they will take on more importance in the coming years.

Once you've established your company and domain name, you can develop your slogan. A good slogan is short, punchy, appropriate, and true to the company and/or product it represents. It should be no more than six words.

The last piece of the brand is your logo. We strongly recommend seeking help with this part unless you are a graphic designer.

Developing Your Business Structure

Most online entrepreneurs typically start out with themselves as the sole employee of their business. However, depending on the type of business you are starting, you may have other full-time consultants, employees, contractors, or freelancers in your business. This is the time to figure out how you will start out and what your targets are (if any) for staffing.

Choosing Office Space

Consider whether or not you need office space. For most online businesses, a home office is a viable option (at least in the early stages). Be sure to have a dedicated space in your home, as well as dedicated telephone and fax lines if necessary.

Designing Your Contact Information

Next, set up convenient ways for clients to contact you. A smartphone with e-mail and Internet access is essential. (So is a reliable provider.) You should have separate business and personal telephone numbers.

You should also have a fax number. Internet faxing is easy and cheap, and can often be accessed from any computer. Be sure to choose a service that provides you with a dedicated number.

Your website should have several e-mail addresses associated with your domain name, such as `yourname@domain.com`, `support@domain.com`, `admin@domain.com`, and `sales@domain.com`. You might monitor all of the e-mail addresses at the beginning, but the separation is important to maintain a professional appearance and to make things easier if your business grows later on.

As well, be sure to get a professional mailing address (especially if you are using a home office). Most postal mailbox services will allow you to use “Suite” instead of “Postal Box” in your mailing address.

Creating a Website

Introduction

Usually, your website will be the home base for your online business. This is where your social media pages, newsletters, and other marketing elements will link back to. It may even be where your customers purchase your products from.

Luckily, creating your own website is easier and cheaper than ever. Here is a guide to getting started. If you feel overwhelmed by the technical aspects of website hosting, seek the help of a mentor or a consultant. Your website will make or break your online business, so be sure that it's done right.

Step One: Choose a hosting service.

First, you will need to choose a company to host your online business. Begin by considering what features your website will have. Will you need support for things like:

- Blog posts
- Newsletters
- Community features like forums, guestbooks, and comments
- Shopping cart and credit card processing services
- Images, Flash animations, audio, and/or video
- Integration with mobile apps and services
- Integration with a particular web editor
- Databases and advanced programming languages (like PHP or ASP)
- FTP or CGI access

Once you've got your wish list made, ask friends or fellow entrepreneurs for some recommendations on hosting companies, and do some Internet research to see what options are available. Here are the basic features that you will need and key questions to ask.

Custom Domain Names

A hosting provider should be able to use a custom domain name and may even be able to register it for you. However, be sure to ask!

Advanced users may want to ask about subdomains or alias domains. For example, if I own the site www.mycompany.com, I may want to purchase the alias domain www.mycompany.org and have it point to the .com site.

Site Setup and Restrictions

Find out how many pages are included with a site package and what the site size limit is. Generally the more pages you have with more complex features (like databases or videos), the more space you will need.

As well, find out what the bandwidth is and if there is a guaranteed uptime percentage. (For example, most hosting companies will guarantee that your site will be online 99-100% of the time.) Test some sites that are currently hosted by the company that you are looking at to evaluate their speed.

E-Mail Features

Ask how many e-mail addresses are included in the hosting package and if they will use your custom domain name. As well, find out what type of access is provided. Some hosting providers only allow e-mail access via their website, while others will allow you to access your e-mail using third-party programs like Microsoft Outlook.

Page Creation Features

Most web hosting companies offer an easy-to-use interface for creating web pages, which is important if you do not have a technical background. Support for integration with other web design programs or online services might also be offered.

Some of the tools that should be available include:

- Built-in website search engine
- Social media integration
- Easy-to-use contact forms

Security and Backup Protocols

Find out what security protocols are used by the hosting company and how data is backed up and stored. This is especially important if they will be hosting your storefront and processing credit card data.

Statistics and Data

Your web host should include easy access to data about your website's traffic.

Support Options

Finally, find out what type of support is included with the hosting package. A good web host should have support available 24/7 via phone and e-mail.

Step Two: Create a domain name and e-mail addresses.

Now, use the tools from your hosting provider to set up your domain and e-mail addresses. Remember to make your addresses relevant, easy to type, and easy to remember.

Step Three: Create your graphic identity.

Next, create your graphic identity based on your logo. Decide on the site's color scheme, fonts, overall design feel, and general layout. For example, each page might have a header with your logo at the top and the same menu design on one side of the page.

Step Four: Design your site.

Now it's time to design your site. Most web hosting companies will offer a variety of themes that you can start from. Pick one that most closely matches your design. You can always update it later, or hire someone once your business picks up.

Remember that on the web, less is more, especially when your site is viewed on smaller screens (like a smartphone or tablet). Use plenty of images, easy-to-read colors, and large fonts. Make sure that each page loads as quickly as possible. Be careful when using media and widgets – not all types of content will play on all devices. (For example, Apple devices do not support Adobe's Flash technology.)

As well, make sure that your site is easy to navigate. Take the time to create a website plan and decide what your overall topic (home page), and sub topics (subpages or branches) will be. Arrange them in a way that makes sense to the visitors of your site, not just you as a writer or designer.

Ensure that your menu or list of links is always visible in the same place on the page and that it consistently appears the same way. You'll want to make sure that you have pages for your products, contact information, and company information. Having a blog on your site is a great idea, too, but make sure that you post several times a week and keep it current.

Step Five: Add your content.

Now it's time to add your content. Readers will usually scan articles rather than reading them, so break material up and use headlines and headers to catch their attention, or pull them toward you.

This means that instead of doing these things:

- Barraging our target market with messages
- Telling everyone our message
- Repeating the message ad nauseum
- Coercing, forcing, or tricking someone

We do these things:

- Encourage a dialogue
- Build trust by being credible and doing what we say we will do
- Show and demonstrate our message (walking the talk)
- Share the message and how our customers use our products or services

This shift in thinking means that we focus on content that people can use. Be concise and use formatting to guide readers to key points in your content. Give readers the most important message first, even if it is your conclusion. You'll word it nicely, of course, so that the flow and rhythm are there for readability, but you must approach your pages (and the top level of your website) with the most important information.

You may have heard about **rich content**; it's a phrase that gets bandied about a lot. It means that you are writing to inform, persuade, or advise about things that your readers need to know (which may not be the same as the things you want to write about). If you have content that stimulates a discussion, encourages dialogue, and provides something people can use, then you are getting the idea of what rich content is all about. You cannot create a website that is peppered with banner ads, messages to "buy now," or "look at me" statements unless you are only focused on creating a digital brochure. You don't encourage readership and engage dialogue with a brochure. Think about rich content, engaging readers in dialogue, and building a tribe (to channel a bit of Seth Godin), and bring readers to your site.

This type of rich content is also what will help search engines find you, and help customers find you in turn. Search engines are moving away from pages stuffed with meaningless keywords and guiding users towards pages that are relevant.

As a final note, make sure that all your content is unique or appropriately licensed. Usually, text, images, and videos from other sites cannot be re-used without explicit permission from the owner. That being said, sharing relevant content via social media, recruiting guest bloggers, or featuring guest posts is a great way to build community and expand your reach.

Step Six: Test and launch.

Once you have your site set up, test it on a variety of platforms and devices. Send it to trusted friends and mentors, too. Ask them questions like:

- How many clicks does it take you to find our products page?
- How long did the Contact Us page take to load for you?
- How effective is our search tool?
- How long did it take you to purchase a product, from finding it to checkout?
- Were you able to find support information?
- What parts of the website worked well?
- What parts of the website did not work well?

As well, have someone who is a great speller and has a good eye for detail review your site for spelling errors, design errors, broken links, etc.

Once you have implemented the feedback from the usability tests, spell check, and design review, it's time to make the site live.

Test Your Knowledge

Checking Out the Sites, Part One

Record your thoughts about each site in the space below.

Site One: Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com/>)

Site Two: Ready Made Designs (<http://www.readymadedesigns.co.uk/>)

Site Three: Shoes of Prey (<https://www.shoesofprey.com/>)

Site Four: Trip Central (<http://www.tripcentral.ca/>)

Site Five: These Are Things (<http://thesearethings.com/>)

Site Six: Little Ones Portraits (<http://www.littleonesportraits.net/>)

Site Seven: Lennox Tartan Design (<http://www.lennoxtartan.com/>)

Site Eight: Welcome to the Future of Football (<http://www.oregongridiron.com/>)

Site Nine: Nico Westermann Media Design (<http://www.nicowestermann.com/>)

E-Commerce Options

What is E-Commerce?

The term “e-commerce” refers to conducting a transaction on the Internet. For your online business, this is how customers will purchase your product.

Test Your Knowledge

When was the last time you purchased a product on the Internet? How did you pay for it?

Most online storefronts use the following online shopping process.

- The website is set up with a shopping cart so that customers can shop for products and choose to purchase them.
- When customers have finished shopping, they click a “Check Out” button.
- Customers may then specify additional options, such as shipping methods and gift wrapping.
- Then the customer enters their address and credit card information. The user may also be offered the option to save their information and/or register with the site for later purchases.
- Once the purchase is complete, the order is sent to the business, payment is processed, and a confirmation page is displayed and/or sent to the customer.

You can also offer customers the option to purchase through a Facebook app or an online marketplace, which will handle the transaction for you for a fee.

E-Commerce Payment Options

There are a number of payment options that you can offer to customers. Which option(s) you choose will depend on how your business is set up and what your hosting company can support.

PayPal

This service acts as an intermediary between consumers and businesses. Users register their credit card or bank account with PayPal and then provide their PayPal information when they want to purchase a product online. Some users prefer this method since their sensitive information is only provided to one company (PayPal) rather than a number of different sites. As well, PayPal has the resources to build and maintain a secure network and payment process. This can provide better security and greater peace of mind for customers.

Credit Card

Another option offered by most online stores is for users to directly enter their credit card information on the site. If you offer this option, be familiar with the fees that you will be charged as well as what security protocols are used and how data is stored.

Bitcoin

This newer form of payment is referred to as decentralized currency, since it is not controlled by a central bank or regulator. Although few online retailers currently accept bitcoin payments, it is becoming more popular.

Telephone and Fax Orders

Some online businesses offer users the option to call or fax in their orders. Then, a representative will call them back to get credit card information. Some customers prefer this over entering their credit card information on the Internet.

Cash On Delivery (COD)

Although less commonly used these days, payment by cash, credit card, or check on delivery is still used by some online companies, particularly small businesses that do in-person deliveries in a small area.

Security and Privacy Considerations

Be very aware of the rules and regulations governing how you gather, use, and store data. If you have third-party companies handling this for you, know their processes and protocols as well. Ask how they protect customer data and respond in the event of a security breach. Keep up with changes in legislation and make sure that your service providers are, too.

Creating a Mobile Presence

Why Go Mobile?

By the end of 2016, U.S. customers will be spending \$327 billion dollars a year online. (*Source: <http://www.forrester.com/US+Online+Retail+Forecast+2011+To+2016/fulltext/-/E-RES60672>*) Some studies say that not having a mobile-optimized website has the same effect as closing a brick and mortar store one day a week. This depends on where you live and work, of course, but there is no question that Internet use is growing around the world.

Making Your Site Mobile-Friendly

It's essential to have a mobile-friendly version of your website that can be loaded quickly and displayed effectively on a small screen. If you've ever tried to use a website with complex menus and tiny buttons on your smartphone, you'll know why this is so important.

There are a few ways to create a mobile version of your site. Some hosting platforms will do it automatically (although the results aren't always the best, so be sure to test the site on several devices and platforms). There are also companies that will optimize the site for you. If you have someone else do it for you, be clear about what you are getting and if updates and maintenance are included. Or, you can do it yourself.

One last note: be sure to offer users the option of accessing the mobile or full site, either when they first visit or through an easy-to-find button.

Creating Apps

Apps are another way to enhance customers' mobile experience. They also help you establish a relationship with the customer and offer them a convenient way to purchase your product.

Here are some features that mobile apps can include:

- Deals and coupons
- Flyers
- Store locator and hours
- Product searches and inventory locators
- Detailed product information and reviews
- Payment options

Test Your Knowledge

List other features you have seen in mobile apps.

Although app development is highly technical, there are plenty of freelancers and specialized companies that can help you determine what type of app is best for your business, develop and test it, and get it published.

Checking Out the Sites, Part Two

Choose one of the sites from this list:

- Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com/>)
- Ready Made Designs (<http://www.readymadedesigns.co.uk/>)
- Shoes of Prey (<https://www.shoesofprey.com/>)
- Trip Central (<http://www.tripcentral.ca/>)
- These Are Things (<http://thesearethings.com/>)
- Little Ones Portraits (<http://www.littleonesportraits.net/>)
- Lennox Tartan Design (<http://www.lennoxtartan.com/>)
- Welcome to the Future of Football (<http://www.oregongridiron.com/>)
- Nico Westermann Media Design (<http://www.nicowestermann.com/>)

Test Your Knowledge

Visit the site on a tablet or smartphone. Navigate through it to examine the features and design. Record your thoughts about the site in the space below.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Joining Online Marketplaces

About Online Marketplaces

Marketplaces are another way to boost your online presence. They typically offer built-in payment processes, virtual stores that you can customize and manage, and a community of users that you can tap into right away.

Before you sign up for an online marketplace, ask the following questions:

- What fees are involved? The marketplace may charge a hosting fee, percentage of revenue, and/or transactional fees.
- What support is offered to businesses and customers?
- What does the customer experience look like? We highly recommend completing a purchase as a customer before you sign up with the site.
- What reputation does the site and its members have?
- How does the site protect your information and customers' information?
- What geographic area does the site focus on?
- Does the site focus on a particular niche? Do you fit into that niche?

Amazon

With customized sites for over 45 countries, Amazon is one of the world's biggest online retailers. In addition to selling goods from major companies, they also allow small businesses to resell used and new goods in a variety of ways. You can also become an affiliate and generate profits by sending customers to Amazon from your website.

eBay

eBay works on a bidding system. Individuals or businesses put a product up for auction at a minimum price for a specific amount of time. Users then bid on the item. When the auction is up, the highest bidder wins the item. eBay offers a variety of protection to its users and to businesses selling items, but it can be hard to establish a niche and make a profit.

Specialty Marketplaces

Specialized sites that focus on a niche market are becoming more popular. Here are some of the top specialty marketplaces at the time of publication.

- Etsy (<http://www.etsy.com/>) focuses on crafts and homemade goods.
- Bonanza (<http://www.bonanza.com/>) sells a wide variety of products like eBay but focuses more on the social side of shopping.
- Roozt (<http://www.roozt.com/>) provides a marketplace for businesses that offer ethically sourced products.
- Newegg (<http://www.newegg.com/>) focuses on electronics and technical gear.
- Abe Books (<http://www.abebooks.com/>) sells used and rare books.
- Ruby Lane (<http://www.rubylane.com/>) focuses on antique and vintage items.

Depending on the product or service that your business offers, these marketplaces may offer you some additional visibility and help get your online business off the ground.

Test Your Knowledge

Can you think of any additional examples of online marketplaces?
