

MAKE IT HAPPEN ON THE NET

By Neil Ogden

Part Two

So, you've decided that your business does want to join the information superhighway and have its own web site, but how do you go about it?

The cheapest way is to use the free web space offered by just about every ISP (Internet Service Provider) and do it yourself with one of the many web design software packages available.

I think a more professional way is to register your own domain name. This will give you your URL in your business name for example www.yourbusiness.co.uk. This not only looks better and more professional, but is in theory better for search engine indexing.

You could register your name and then have it set up to automatically re-direct all visitors to a free ISP site. Or you can host your site directly under your domain name. There are many companies around that will do this for you, many also include domain registration as a service they offer, Prices vary and change a lot so shop around. A good place to look is in the small box ads at the back of a computer or Internet magazines.

The registration price of a co.uk domain name has fallen considerably in the last few years. Look carefully and you will find companies that will do it for less than £10 a year. There are some hosting companies that may even register your domain free if you host the site with them.

There are many different domain extensions around nowadays. Co.uk and .com are the two most popular, but there are others such as .biz, .net, .gb.com, .uk.com and many more. These will vary in price, but are worth considering.

Once you've decided and actioned which route you're going to take, you need to decide how you're going to design your site. You could learn to design in html code, the language behind every web page. Whilst it is good to have some knowledge of how html works, I really don't see the point of doing it this way whilst there are so many "what you see is what you get" (WYSIWYG) software packages available that can do a perfectly adequate job. Software like DreamWeaver, Hot Metal Pro and Microsoft FrontPage enable the designing of perfectly good web sites in an environment which is easy to use and get the hang of.

It's not necessarily the tool itself that produces the good web site, it's the use you make of it.

Having said that, some knowledge of html code is useful as there are many places on the net to find extras that can be inserted as code into your page. I have found a piece of software called J-Perk particularly useful for simple effects (www.mcwebsoftware.com). Another good site to look for special effects is www.frontlook.com. This one is especially for you if you use Microsoft FrontPage for designing your site.

Some people by the way, groan at the thought of using FrontPage for designing pages, but these people obviously haven't seen the software recently. It is now much better than earlier versions, and with the liberal use of effects and functions gained from other sources, it is possible to produce excellent sites with it. As I said earlier, it's not the tool, but the use that is made of it.

Of course you may not feel you have the time or the knowledge to set up your site yourself, which is where a web design company comes in. There are many of these around, offering products which vary greatly in price. But what you get for your money varies greatly too. Some charge for every single thing they do to your web site, others include a certain amount in the price and charge for extras.

Some companies charge by the page, while others charge by the megabyte. It's a good idea to shop around, and maybe talk to other businesses you know have got a good web site and see who did theirs.

Once your site is up and running, the work has only just started. Promotion is on going. There are two main battles - getting people to find your site and once you've got people there, getting them to come back.

Search engines are a must. There are several major ones like Yahoo, Alta Vista, Google and Excite, but thousands of smaller search engines and link sites which all index sites under subject. Most do the indexing automatically by sending a "spider" round the Internet to gather information about the sites. That's why you may find a page you've never submitted anywhere appearing on a search engine or directory somewhere. Try typing "Neil Ogden" into Yahoo for example and you'll find many such pages.

Search engines like to find lots of links to a site and they rank these higher than those where they can't find links. Exchanging links with other sites, especially those with high traffic, is always a good idea.

There are many places around the Internet where you can submit to a multiple number of search engines in one go. Some are free, others charge, but it's worth trying one or two of these out.

Be warned though. Getting listed on a search engine could take a while. Yahoo say allow 2 - 4 months. It will almost certainly be a few weeks.

There are also companies who will do the submissions for you. Beware of companies who say they can guarantee you top placements though. They usually can't, or do it in such a way that some search engines will end up banning a site. The company I use is 1st Choice Promotions run by Derek Chambers (www.1stchoicepromotions.com).

As mentioned in part one, put your web site address on business cards, letterheads, printed ads, circulars etc. Use it as an extension to your existing promotional literature and advertising. Offline promotion of your site is as important as online promotion.

So, once people have found your site, how do you encourage them to come back?

The very simplest thing is to update your site regularly. I am amazed by the number of sites which I come across which haven't changed for months. In fact I came across a company recently which has a "multi media web site design" arm to its business. Yet its own web site hasn't been updated since August 1998!

You need to give your potential customers a reason to come back. Have a special offer each month or even a freebie for an enquiry. Many people use the Internet to search for information so why not have some articles on a related subject, perhaps incorporated into an online magazine. You may well find writers who are willing to let you use their material for free if you give them some free advertising on your site.

Getting visitors to join a mailing list is a good way to get interested visitors' names and e-mail addresses. Once you've got their e-mail address, you can continue to mail them with details of your promotions and encourage them to return to the web site. Publish an e-zine and send it out to those people.

How about setting up a discussion community about your line of business. If subscribers have to come to your site to subscribe or find out about it, they'll have a look around while they're there! The most popular company for e-mail discussion groups is YahooGroups (www.yahogroups.com). The Home Business Discussion List has been running successfully for sometime using their facilities. You can make new contacts, and share information. And it's free to set up a group.

Finally, a word about e-commerce - accepting credit card payment over the Internet. I wanted my business Associate Internet Promotions to be able to offer an e-commerce package and I finally found a company to work with and launched the package a few years ago. The first thing I discovered when investigating e-commerce is that it's a minefield. There are so many things to think about and the banks are still very cautious. Even while I was setting up the first site, my customer's bank was saying certain things were not quite right. It's understandable really when you consider the amount of money credit card companies lose each year in charge back claims from Internet transactions, but it can be immensely frustrating.

The first thing you need is to be able to do is accept credit cards. The best banks to approach for credit card merchant facilities are Barclays and Nat West. You will probably find that Internet transactions come under the heading of "mail order" in the eyes of the banks.

The next important thing to think about is where is the secure part of your site going to be based. You need a company that can provide secure server space that utilises encryption to the highest possible standard. There are again various companies that offer this; you may get a better deal if you go via a web site design company. Every page from the credit card detail entry stage onwards has got to be on a secure server.

Finally, to set the product pages up, you need a piece of software called a Shopping Cart. Again there are many packages, so it's worth looking around. They are most likely to store items in a searchable database.

If you can't accept credit cards or have been refused by the banks, don't panic as there are a few alternatives, mostly in the form of companies based in America which offer some sort of merchant facility. One of these in particular looks very attractive to UK web site owners, offering the opportunity to accept multi-currency payments on your behalf for your products from your web site. It's very simple to set up (and free) and allows anyone who doesn't have a merchant account to accept credit card payments via their web site. All you need is a credit or debit card. Take a look at www.paypal.com.

However you do it, E-commerce can be quite a time consuming thing to set up, but I personally believe the rewards are potentially huge.

Hopefully the above will have given you some food for thought about the Internet and how your business can make very profitable use of it.

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