How to introduce your business to the internet?
by Maximilian Moegling

This article was designed for businesses in the Massachusetts South Coast area. Its goal is to help local businesses to benefit from the internet.

This document provides local businesses with two internet strategies. The first strategy gives the required key information to open a presence on the internet. The second one provides the basics how an existing local brick and mortar company can use the internet as an additional sales channel.

Web presence
For a company it should be common at least to have a web presence. Why? A simple web business card does not cost a considerable amount of money and customer demands for online contact resources nowadays. You might think that e-commerce is not applicable for your kind of operations, but customers could use the information provided on your website as a decision support to assign a new contract to you. They might even find you through your web site on the first hand.

This section is designed evolutionary. Your will find additional information about the covered topics in the infoboxes on the right side.

To keep it simple, if you are only looking for a web business cards, you do not have to consider hiring a third party or employing somebody for this purpose.

You (your office) should have the following things.

1. Internet connection (you need to be able to check your emails)
2. Credit Card (Most hosting services accept only credit cards. Remember only to disclose your credit card information on secured websites.)
3. Computer (It is to be recommended to update browsers and operating systems frequently and to install an anti virus tool.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Safety Tools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microsoft Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti Virus Tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Associates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McAfee Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symantec (Norton Anti Virus)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Your company's address on the internet is the domain name. A domain name, such as www.socoec.com can be obtained through different vendors. You should choose your domain name wisely, because it will be associated with your business. For example, if your company's name is Sullivan Construction New Bedford, a good domain could be one of the following:

- sullivan.com
- scnb.com
- sullivan-newbeford.com
- sullivan-contruction.com
- sullivan-nb.com

If you choose a name containing dashes, you might also want to consider to register the version without the dash. Registering a dot com domain varies from 6 to 35 USD per year. You only have the property rights on your domain name as long as you renew your registration. Besides dot com domains, there is a country domain for every country recognized by the United Nations. Dot com is the most likely domain name for an US based company, however there is also an additional dot us domain. A domain name should be as short as possible and easy to remember/to spell.

If you choose a domain name, which is a fantasy name or your company's name short cut. You want to make sure not to violate any trade name rights. Since your company could easily be found now, also trade mark owner could claim their rights without difficulty.

You might also want to register domain names for your trademarked products, or if not already taken, domain names associated with your industry. Those domain names should be used as additional alias domains.

Most domain name registration places provide you with tools to build simple business cards. Those business card applications do not require further knowledge about website programming.

In general, websites are written in HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language). A more advanced language is XML (Extended Markup Language). Websites can contain pictures, which normally are stored in JPEG/JPG format and graphics, which normally are stored in GIF format.

Due to this point, having a web business card / domain can be recommended to every business.

If you have the feeling, for example after reviewing websites from competitors, that you should have a more informative website, it is to be recommended to spend some time, defining a real internet strategy for your company.

A strategy can be defined as the answer to the question where do we want to go. An organization's strategy has a long term aspect. A subset of the global organization strategy is the IT strategy, which defines the goals of IT. Whereas, the e-commerce strategy is a subset of the IT strategy. If e-commerce plays a major role in the organization's business concept, the e-commerce strategy will more likely have a bigger share in the overall business strategy.
The main elements of a strategy are forecasting, allocating resources, to formulate the strategy, to analyze the environment, and to analyze the organization itself. Forecasting means to estimate how the idea will do in the future. Will there be a demand? What will our market position be? How is the legal situation in the future? In order to make a strategy working, the organization need to allocate initial resources, such as office space, human resources, and financial resources. In addition, an organization need to analyze the environment, in order to find for example the perfect location for the idea (connection to highways, internet connection, and access to labor are important factors). A method to analyze an organization and its environment is the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats analysis (SWOT).

Assuming you want to create a webpage with ten pages of product information, one contact page, and one start page, it is to be recommended not to use webbased website development application any more.

If you enlarge your web presence, you have to increase the amount of webspace (memory on a webserver) allocated to your domain name. Domain names can be easily pointed to a new location on the internet.

This is a critical point for a company. Theoretically you can create webpages without knowledge even by using Microsoft Word (just save document as a HTML file). In addition, there are other low cost HTML "What you see is what you get Editors" such as Microsoft Frontpage or Dreamweaver on the market. You might also need software to edit pictures or graphics. Furthermore, you might want to consider to buy a HTML reference book for beginners to be able to understand the basic HTML concepts. To upload your website to the internet you need a FTP (File Transfer Protocol) software.

From a professional's point of view, it is highly to be recommended to do extensive analysis of competitors' websites and of other websites in general, before creating the own pages.

If you have the feeling that your website does not have a professional look, it highly recommended not to put these pages life. Since you want to attract customers, you should have a professional website. Instead take the information (content) you have already created and use a professional webdesigner to build a professional layout for you. If you plan to maintain your website yourself in the future, you should arrange with the contractor to create a solution that allows you to edit you website without an intermediary.
After you website is online, you have to promote it. There are a few basics to remember:

1. Give each page a good title. This title string will appear in search engines.
2. Submit your website to search engines and directories. You might want to think about paying to become a sponsored link. The advantage would be that search engines and directories list you immediately instead of waiting a few month and you are listed above all other links.
3. Define "Meta-Tags". Meta tags are keywords within your webpage, which are used by search engines
4. Use your domain name on every correspondence, sign, and advertisement.
5. Analyze your website traffic. What promotion activities create the most traffic, which one create the most contacts?

When you consider to have a more enhanced web presence and you feel that concentrating on your business's core competencies create more revenue for you, it is highly to recommend to outsource website development to a third party.

On the other hand, if you consider to that internet not only have a supportive role in your business plan, but strategic, you might want to consider to hire somebody with e-business background.

Internet as an additional sales channel
This paper concentrates on the selling abilities of the internet. There are different ways, how you can enable e-commerce activities on your website. A simple way is to use third parties such as different shopping platforms for example Yahoo or Ebay. The advantage is that you don't have to worry about the implementation of a shopping cart application.

When it comes to real e-business activities, you should spend some moments to think about an informed strategy that suits your business. You have to have an answer for the following key points

- Who will fulfill internet orders?
  You need to check if you have free capacity for additional orders.
- How do you get your products to international customers?
  Since your website can be found from anywhere in the world, you might get orders from foreign countries. International orders can bring additional difficulties with them. For example, you need to comply to foreign laws. In addition, claiming late payments is difficult, if you are out of the country.
- Only customers from your local state need to pay the state's sales tax, but it might be that there special internet sales tax in certain countries. To address this problem, if your order qualifies for extra taxes or customs, there are several services available online.
- Is your product worth shipping?
  Your product might be not worth shipping around the world or on the other hand, it is to expensive to be ordered online.
How do you secure the privacy of your customers?
Every time you collect trackable customer data, such as addresses or financial information, you should protect this data in your own interest. If your business gets the reputation that it does not honor privacy, it will have a long lasting negative impact. You should only have customers enter their personal information on SSL secured (recommended 128 bit) websites. If you transfer information by email afterwards, make sure to honor privacy in those, too. An email is not a secured way of communication, since it can be filtered at every transfer point.

How do you process credit card orders automatically?
You need a merchant agreement with a credit card clearing provider. Most likely those companies sign only a contract with you, if you have a good business history. You have to decide what credit cards you would like to accept. You have to pay a commission for each credit card transaction. This commission is based on the credit card company and your transaction volume.

Do you have a product that needs further explanation or needs to be configured? How can your customers serve themselves online? If your product needs further explanation or the customer has to configure it before he can order it, you must have the resources to make code changes in the shopping card application.

How do you protect yourself against business fraud?
Most of the merchant/clearing services have a build in credit card fraud protection solution. You might want to set an order limit for new customers.

How do you change your existing web presence into an interactive shopping cart e-commerce site?
Interactive shopping websites require expertise in internet based program languages, if you want to have your own solution. There are standard solutions on the market, which do not require any programming knowledge. However, these application are not easy to customize.

How do you plan to handle customer contacts?
You should be able to respond to customer inquiries within 24 hours.

How do you connect your website to virtual market places?
An additional sales channels might be virtual markets. Dependent on your industry there might be several of those virtual markets available.

How do you link your inventory system with your store front application, without jeopardizing your network security?
If your inventory is changing very frequently and you have experienced a number of out of stock orders, you should link your inventory system to the shopping cart application. If you link your network to the internet, you have to secure it from intruders (for example by using firewall systems).

This document provided you with basic information. Each topic alone could fill books. It is to be recommended to use the given resource links as a first starting point for information. If you came to the point that e-business could be a major sales channel for your business in the future and you consider to make major investments, it is highly recommended to hire a consultant. At this point I would like to distinguish between a web/graphic/application developer and a consultant. An e-commerce consultant should have extensive knowledge about the work of a
web/graphic/application developer, but an e-commerce consultant also offers strategic management knowledge. From my point of view, this is an important value added that could make the difference between success and failure of your e-business experience.

To sum up, whether you simply choose to create a web business card or a complex e-commerce website, your strategy should be to enhance customers' satisfaction. If you have the feeling that your online approach can not compete with your competitors' e-business models, you should consult a professional. Otherwise you risk the relationship to your customers.

About the author: Maximilian Moegling has studied business administration in Germany and in the USA. He has an own e-commerce consulting company since 1998. Since then he was involved in many projects including consulting for TUI (world's largest tourism concern), Siemens, Diakonie Hospital chain, ZETTLER Components, and various other American, European, and Asian companies in the electromechanical components industry. He was also involved in developing several internet based business models such as RelayCenter.com. He has been listed as an e-commerce expert for the electromechanical components industry in various industry related magazines as well in the leading German PC journal "PC Magazin" as a top e-commerce consultant.

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