



## Your Own On-line Business - Can you build it? Yes, you can!

In the previous issue (Your Own Business MM10) I presented some of the main considerations for anyone contemplating going into business on their own for the first time. Even though I have been there myself, I never realised how complex it actually was until I started listing the elements that I believed required addressing both before and after starting up. For this reason, I felt it best to discuss the current topic separately because, although the advice already offered is pertinent to any new business venture and should be read in conjunction with this article, the on-line version and the environment it operates in really is a world apart.

For starters, no contact is face-to-face. Unless an on-line store has a concrete-and-glass counterpart that you can walk into and wander round, you have no idea how big or small it might be, whether it is honourable or shonky, if the goods and services it is offering for sale are genuine or merely pretty pictures of something you will pay for, but never receive. That's the worrying aspect. The up-side is that you can have your own website that looks as good as all the others, and you can operate it from a laptop! That means limited overheads and, depending on what you are selling, a work-schedule customised to your desired lifestyle. Once your business is out there, it is open 24/7 and available to every potential buyer from Moscow to Meekatharra. All you have to do is manage it. Well, maybe there's a little more to it than that...

Let's assume you already have the basics, they being something to sell and the means to supply. Obviously, the first thing you need is a shop window, a Website to display your merchandise or services, plus your trading terms and conditions. You can employ someone to create this for you, but it won't be cheap. Your own time, however, is free and if you want to do it yourself you can; but you'll need the knowledge and expertise if you aren't already conversant with web design and creation. Should you fancy learning the ropes, it will take time as we discovered, because that's what we did with [aseasonofhappiness.com](http://aseasonofhappiness.com). And we got all the information we needed off the Internet. There are courses in scripting from basic HTML to Java Script and more. These will train you how to write the instructions that produce both simple and sophisticated web pages, and many of these tutorials are free. For those of you who think it's too complicated, or simply want to get started sooner rather than later, you'll be employing someone to do the job for you.

They will be creating the basic design of the website, firstly the "Home" or "Index" page which is an overview of what you have to offer, plus any extra pages - those that list goods in separate categories. For example: saddles on one page, bridles and tack on another, with a third for boots, blankets and accessories. Don't forget to include some good pictures that catch the eye. Your website must be easy for visitors to navigate, saving them from becoming trapped part way through and having to go back to the Home page and start again - chances are, they'll just leave and won't come back. Each page should be attractive, informative and above all, every single facility must work. In particular, that means the hyperlinks allowing prospective customers to go straight to their desired location such as the payment agency when they decide to buy something. There is nothing more annoying than to click on a link and be presented with an almost-blank screen bearing a message telling you that the page you selected cannot be found! It is inefficient and will result in lost sales. So, my first bit of advice is: check, double check, and triple check your web pages prior to uploading them, and again once they go live. The second is to ensure you are given the ability and knowledge to edit pages yourself so that you can change items, prices and images. If your web designer has to do it for you, you'll pay, pay pay!

Before you can put your website on the Internet you will need someone to Host it. There are quite a few out there who provide this service and I would prefer not to recommend one over another. You will have to research those available and pick the one which suits your needs. However, what I will say is that the most expensive is not necessarily the best, neither is the cheapest the one to avoid. We elected to go with a relatively local host, mainly because we were

new to the scene and felt sure we would require frequent, customised support that we might not get from a bigger company half a world away. The decision turned out to be the wise option and we are happy to pay a little more for the privilege of being able to pick up the phone and speak to a real person in our capital city who gladly fixes our problems straight away. You might like to consider how much confidence and satisfaction this level of personalised service brings and maybe extend it to your own customers.

What are you intending to sell, anyway - children's toys, secretarial services, holiday-home rentals, joy flights...? There isn't much that can't be traded on-line, but each category has its own parameters which existing customers have become used to, and these will need to be researched by checking out similar businesses on the Internet.. You may decide you want to be different to the rest, which is great, if it works. How will you know this? Well, you might think, if the presentation is good and the merchandise is known to be in demand, volume of sales should be the barometer. Unfortunately, the on-line market place is very different to its real-world equivalent. You don't just have a store in a busy street which hundreds of people walk along every day. You have a web address, one of millions buried somewhere way down a list that would stretch to the North Pole and back. This is the street buyers are flitting along, surfing they call it, and they don't have time to check out every shop window along the way. Even if you could stick "AAAAA" at the beginning of your domain name, it still wouldn't guarantee you top spot. To test it out, forget the website - nobody knows it even exists yet. Instead, try a search for one of the items you have for sale - maybe rolltop desks - and see how many results you get. You may be surprised, especially when you discover that the list contains not only items for sale, but also general information and references to wherever those specific words are mentioned, in whatever context. You are a microscopic fish in the world's ocean, and somehow you have to attract attention.

Here's where SEO comes in. That's geek-speak for Search Engine Optimisation. What it means is: making the most of search-engine practices to get your name and merchandise as high up their list as you can. Organisations like Google and Yahoo use 'Bots' and 'Spiders' to crawl through every website, recording any descriptive words they find. The more often a particular reference appears on your pages, the higher your listing climbs. Most important is the meta data which describes both your website and your pages. This is similar to the index at the front of a newspaper or a magazine. Check out SEO and meta data on the Net to see what they mean, and plan on making them work for you. If it's too mind-boggling to tackle yourself there are agencies prepared to help; but like you, they are in business and rarely give their time and expertise for nothing.

Even with the SEO covered, you will still need to formulate your own promotional strategy. Whatever the category of your stock in trade, there will be places which will advertise your wares, but it won't be for free. Maybe there are groups or associations whose members might be interested in what you have to offer. Email them to find out. They may not even entertain your proposal, but someone will read the email, and that person might just be in the market for your merchandise, or they may know someone who is. You may consider this to be a waste of time. In the big picture, it is small potatoes, but it's an example of how you have to start thinking. Try to come up with something better, send out press releases, use as many ways as you can to reach out to more than just a few prospective customers. It's as important as the quality of the goods appearing on your website.

By now, it will be evident that getting noticed isn't easy. Once you achieve that much, if only in a small way to begin with, you have to keep it rolling. You've probably heard of particular Internet features going viral, like cute videos on You Tube. That's when the initial visitors to a web page recommend it to someone else, who passes it to another, and so on. It's a bit like pyramid letters, a ripple that becomes a tsunami. The chance of your small business venture achieving this status is remote, but you have to be prepared for a better-than-expected success, especially when you first launch your website - call it curiosity value. Should this happen, you must be ready to fill every order immediately as if it was the only one. That's what the customer expects - special, personalised attention. Fail to do this and your reputation for inadequate service will spread far quicker than you can fix the problem and get back on track. Whether you are manufacturing yourself, or buying in from another source, make sure you have enough stock on

hand to fill at least a few orders. And bear in mind how long these stocks will take to replenish if they sell out on the first day. I'm not suggesting you should pile up the spare room with ready-made T shirts - that's not the idea of on-line selling - but you must try to hook as many of the shoal as you can before it swims off. Then you have to cast out some more ground bait to attract new clients. Always be on the look out for fresh ideas, and never let up on the promotions - you have to bring in the customers any which way you can before your opposition grabs them. That's the nature of on-line business.

On-line shopping is easy for both buyer and seller, and the money side is no different, having been tailored to suit the medium. The customer simply grabs a shopping cart, clicks in the intended purchases, then goes to the check-out department. Depending on your type of business, you may prefer not to handle this yourself, rather passing on the responsibility to a trustworthy payment agency. Pay Pal springs to mind, but there are more to choose from. I would prefer not to make recommendations because [aseasonofhappiness.com](http://aseasonofhappiness.com) doesn't actually sell anything, so there is no exchange of money. From your point of view, however, you will most likely need to put a system in place so that buyers can pay you. And, of course, there may be times when refunds have to be dealt with. These, especially, should be treated with no-less importance than a normal sale. If the customer has to wait too long, or is made to feel dissatisfied, they won't be coming back and will probably spread news of your untrustworthiness. That's something you don't want. Find yourself a reputable payment agency that suits the way you do things and doesn't have too many provisos that are likely to leave you waiting for your money, or out of pocket if something goes wrong with the transaction. If you know of someone already operating an on-line business, have a word with them about it before you make your decision. This is particularly important if you are considering keeping it all in-house and like the idea of taking on the money side yourself. Believe me, it's a huge responsibility and very convoluted. Personally, I'd leave it to the experts!

If your stock in trade is downloadable, as with eBooks, software and computer packages, there is the extra problem of security involved. DRM, or Digital Rights Management, is a must if you are to prevent your programs being hacked, then copied and sold illegally. You should also think about how you are going to prevent original buyers from copying your product and distributing it among their friends - every one means a lost sale for you. Once again, be thorough in your research of suitable marketing companies before you take the plunge to do it yourself. Like the payment agencies, they operate 24/7, which means you can sell to anyone in the world, anytime, and the initial transaction can be done and dusted in minutes. All you have to do is get the orders out as quickly as you can.

No doubt you have given this process some thought. With hard-goods, it is a return to the old methods, in many instances snail mail. With the advent of emails, postal services throughout the world took a financial hit and floundered for a while. Then came on-line shopping and they were back in business, big time. Some countries seem to be coping better than others, so you will have to bear this in mind if your intention is to sell to the International market, allowing for any likely delays in customers receiving your products, and in some cases non-delivery (you might like to consider some type of insurance to cover this and the possibility of goods damaged in transit). Needless to say, the cost of packing must be added to your prices, plus postal and freight charges. There may also be an additional complication, that being the levying and collection of sales tax. As owner/operator/supplier, you are responsible for complying with the rules of any country in which you do business, including applying to the respective government agencies for registration. My advice here is very plain - don't delay, and do it right first time. Governments have long memories and the arms to match!

Website security has always been an issue, and it always will be. Once you launch your website, it is your responsibility, not only to yourself for ensuring both your site and your computer don't get compromised by hackers, but also to your visitors and prospective customers so that you don't pass on something undesirable and destructive to them. It may take a long time to establish your name as a worthwhile click, but it takes far less to be outlawed by respectable surfers. Never doubt that they talk to each other. Bad news spreads far quicker than the good kind, and if your website becomes a frequent agent for contamination... Well, if you were an affected visitor, what would you do? Security Managers like Norton, McAfee and AVG will not only protect your

site from unauthorised infiltration, but on request will also assess your security rating and, if it passes their test, will give you their positive endorsement. So, when anyone Googles your name, it will come up with your security manager's "tick" of approval after it, rather than a "?" which indicates it to be a questionable site.

As I've already said, you aren't the only one out there and each business is waving its own flag, most of which are bigger, flashier and better known than yours. They can afford expensive promotions to get known and stay in the foreground, whereas you can't. There is, however, a way to use their high profile to your advantage - it's called affiliation. This is when you negotiate a reciprocal agreement with another entity to include a direct link on your website to theirs. In many cases, the arrangement comes with a financial bonus, a small commission on sales resulting from the visitor's click, always assuming they buy something. It sounds good, and it can be - if you choose your affiliates carefully. Stick with similar associations to your own line of business. Or if you decide to diversify to cast a wider net, check out the web pages of your intended affiliates to see that they don't display something which may be detrimental to you and your reputation. Imagine a mother browsing your selection of toddler's clothes who sees a link with "babies" in the web address, clicks on it and finds herself confronted by a gallery of scantily-dressed models in suggestive poses! If you think affiliations might be the way to go, just bear in mind that your policy and image both need protection.

Once your website is up and running and you have initiated some kind of promotion, visitors will start arriving. They will be few at first, but the clicks, hopefully, will increase over time. Most will presumably come because they believe you are offering something that interests them. If they like what they see, they may even recommend it and your site to others, perhaps by word of mouth, but more likely via the Net. That, of course, is a good thing; but there is a down side. Your business can also be the target of "Haters". These are sad individuals who gain some perverse delight from posting negative comments about websites, products, even people - to them, everything and everyone is "fair" game. This is called "Trolling" - remember the grumpy creatures from the fairy tales? - the practice of going on-line with the express purpose of finding sites where they can dump their hurtful spam. These spoilers will even log onto Xbox games, don a headset and troll everyone playing with abuse, but not actually play the game themselves. There's little you can do to prevent Haters commenting in the public arena - everyone has the right to criticise - but if they do it on your site, there are measures you can take:

- 1) Don't respond to them - they are waiting for that and it will just feed their enormous egos.
- 2) If they post comments, delete them. Or, better still, make posting messages by approval only.
- 3) Don't believe what they are saying - it's all down to jealousy because they haven't the intelligence or staying-power to achieve what you have.
- 4) Don't take it personally; don't hate them back; don't even pity them - they aren't worth it. Just develop a thick skin and get on with your business.

Starting your own on-line business is a very personal thing, and your website will say as much about you as it does about the services you are offering for sale. Think well on this. It has taken you a long time to become who you are now and I daresay there are goals not yet achieved that you are still working on. Put all of this past experience to work for you and make a success of this rewarding opportunity.

I'll leave you with the words of Kristy from Western Australia, a friend who has recently started an on-line business and who helped with the writing of this:

"Have your huge dreams, but start them small! Know your budget. Know your product. Get some education on the business do's and don't's. And last but not least, stick at it. I have met some amazing business owners who have taken several years to finally establish a well-functioning business."

Thanks Kristy.

**Next issue: Buy Superseded and Save - last year's model can be better value**

**Our eBooks are available now in formats to suit popular eReaders, PC and Mac**

**The must-have  
Self-Help eBook**



**Romance/  
Suspense**



**Horror**



**Heroic Fantasy**



**Visit the eBooks section to read the obligation-free, extended previews and get a good feel for the books before you buy. Or you can send one as a gift to a friend. Just click on the direct link to your favourite eBook store to see how.**

Where every effort has been made to be accurate and fair-minded, comments and opinions expressed on this website are based on personal experience and do not necessarily reflect the views of the wider community or those groups and institutions mentioned. A Season of Happiness and its staff accept no responsibility for any outcome based on suggestions offered. What works for us may not work for you. Please bear this in mind.