



Doing business online

This guide looks at promoting your business and selling goods and services over the Internet. Its purpose is twofold:

1. For small and medium sized businesses that already do business online – to provide pointers on how to extend and improve their operation
2. For the 52 per cent of UK small businesses that still do not have a website – to provide information and tips on how to get started

The three principal ways to promote a business and trade online are:

1. An online source of information where customers and prospects can find out about your products or services and make contact with you
2. An online marketing campaign
3. An online sales channel

These can be established in any combination depending on the nature of the business.

The following checklists highlight areas of best practice essential for developing a successful online operation.

WEBSITE

The centrepiece of any online operation is the website. Here are some tips for getting the best out of your website and avoiding common pitfalls:

- Unless you are experienced in web design have your site professionally produced
- Keep the design simple and make sure that design serves functionality, not the other way round
- Ensure that the design of the site reflects your corporate identity and serves to enhance your company's image
- Like a good store directory, effective navigation is the key to a good website – make sure users can find what they want easily and always know where they are on the site
- Use the three-click rule so that users can get to where they want to go with a maximum of three clicks
- On every page of your site provide essential contact information, especially e-mail and telephone details
- Be a regular customer of your own site and test its appearance and functionality rigorously
- Pay particular attention to how the site works where customers make choices about sizes, colours, etc
- Make sure you have good feedback mechanisms and be seen to be implementing improvements
- Ensure your website design allows for growth and expansion in the future
- Above all else, make sure site content is always up-to-date and accurate



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E-COMMERCE

An increasing number of people now shop online for both products and services. To sell online you need an e-commerce set up:

- Acquire all elements of your e-commerce operation, including Internet merchant account, payment gateway, and shopping cart from reputable providers
- Make sure that the system is suited to your particular purposes and allows for any anticipated expansion
- Nothing puts customers off more than a shopping cart that is unclear, inefficient, or seemingly unsafe, so make sure it is user friendly (see panel)
- Where appropriate, include an affiliate sales programme in your operation
- Security is paramount with e-commerce websites so make sure your entire system is protected against viruses, scams, and hackers, and above all that the information customers entrust to you is protected at all times

TIPS FOR A USER-FRIENDLY SHOPPING CART

Keep the customer informed at every stage of the process with a retraceable progress indicator

Do not allow an order to proceed if stock is unavailable

Provide information on shipping costs at the beginning of the process

Provide links from the cart back to the product pages

Allow changes of quantity, size, colour etc to be made from the cart

Allow errors to be corrected without having to refill the form

Provide automatic pre-fill for returning customers

Send immediate e-mail confirmation once the order is complete

FULFILMENT

Online customers are becoming increasingly sophisticated and developing higher and higher expectations. Smooth order fulfilment is essential if you are going to meet these:

- Keep the customer informed at every stage of the order processing
- Ensure all deliveries are made on time
- Provide delivery tracking where possible
- Ensure that all products are well packed and protected from damage in transit
- Where possible offer a no quibbles easy-to-use returns system
- Follow up delivery with a brief e-mail satisfaction survey
- Provide product support on your website

MARKETING

Online sales depend on having appropriate online and offline marketing strategies in place.

Take every opportunity in your publications and offline communications to promote your website

Use professional services to ensure your website is optimised for search engines

Where appropriate take advantage of other online marketing methods such as:

- Pay-per-click marketing
- Article marketing
- Affiliate marketing
- E-mail marketing
- Social marketing using media such as Facebook and Twitter

CUSTOMER SUPPORT

Where possible provide multiple channels of customer support on your website including:

- FAQs
- Downloadable user manuals
- Updates and upgrades
- E-mail support
- A live help customer chat facility
- Full contact information
- Where appropriate links to your Facebook, Twitter, etc pages

LEGAL AND COMPLIANCE

The publication of websites, trading online, and e-mail, fax, and telephone marketing are all covered by strict regulations. Ensure that your entire online operation is in full compliance with all relevant regulations including:

- Companies Act
- E-commerce Regulations
- Distance Selling Regulations
- Provision of Services Regulations
- Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations
- Disability Discrimination Act

CONCLUSION

This is a vast and for the beginner something of a daunting subject, and we can only touch on it in this brief guide. If you would like further information or advice on any of these points, do contact us. We are always happy to help and advise where we can; and where we can't we will do our best to put you in touch with someone who can.