

## Essentials of Getting Your Business Online

A **VIEWPOINT** article  
by Peter Parrish

The question is no longer if you'll give your business an online presence, but when. Simply put, most businesses can no longer achieve their full potential without using the Internet...without giving themselves at least a basic presence on the Worldwide Web. This **VIEWPOINT** provides readers with a checklist of the essentials of an online presence, essentials that every business - retail and otherwise - must first address in getting their business online.

**Getting connected:** At the beginning of 2004, more than 60% of all adults in North America have an e-mail address and use the Internet on a regular basis - at work, at home or both. If you are not yet online, this is the first step you need to take. There is a wide variety of local businesses offering basic e-mail service. This group is certain to include your telephone company, your cable television company and a selection of Internet service providers to whom you connect across phone line or cable. There are also wireless and satellite Internet providers, but these are more complex and costly Internet services better left for future consideration. Once you are online with your personal e-mail address, from work or from home, you are ready to connect to your customers.

**Your web address:** With just an e-mail address you can send and receive messages from your customers. The next step is to give your business a web address (also known as a domain). A web address is the name of your business, an abbreviation of your business name or some other recognizable name presented in the www.(your name here).com format. A web address can be used by your customers to find your website, and can also be used to create business e-mail addresses for your employees and you.

Any Internet or web services provider will gladly assist you with registering your web address. As there are now more than ten million web addresses already registered, it may not be possible to get the exact name of your business. This is why abbreviations and other recognizable names are substituted. The company registering your web address can assist you with selecting an appropriate web address for your business.

**Creating your website:** With the web address of your business properly registered, you are now able to design, develop and publish a website for your business. You have many options as to the size and complexity of your website. I recommend you read the **VIEWPOINT** article, "Growing Your Business Online" for a discussion of the most common types of retail websites. Also take a few minutes to visit other websites, perhaps the sites of local businesses that you know and respect. Make note of the design, content and services being utilized by these sites to serve customers online. Decide what customer service elements you want to present on your website; what look and feel you want for your website; and what level of customer interaction you want to offer on your website.

There are software programs that you can use to design and develop your own website, following a process similar to designing a printed brochure. There is also a wide range of website design and development professionals you can hire to do the work for you. These include freelance designers, web service providers, multimedia studios and marketing and creative companies. The decision on the best professional service to design your website will most likely be based on the type of site you choose – from a simple brochure to a fully-integrated webstore.

Once your website format has been designed, the product presentation and customer services tools you require have been developed and the text and image content of your website have been added; your website is ready to publish. Internet and web service providers are once again able to manage this requirement for you. Your website service provider (web host) will maintain copies of the completed pages and all underlying programming, e.g. shopping cart, product catalogue database, etc., of your website on its servers; and will provide unlimited access to your website for anyone interested in contacting your business online.

**Online marketing:** Think of your website as a branch office for your business. You need to provide marketing and promotional support for your website, as you would certainly provide for any new branch office of your business that you open. The Internet offers a wide range of options for delivering your marketing and promotional messages to current and new customers. The first step is to inform your current customers of your website. Make sure that your web address is universally and prominently displayed on all printed materials used by your business.

The next step is to get the web address of your business registered with the principal search engines (online directories). Search engines provide easy opportunity for Internet users to look up business information, and other information, by name of business, business topic and other subject queries. Search engines allow your customers to find your website even if they do not have your proper web address.

Once access to your website has been adequately publicized, you can begin planning for e-mail marketing and other interactive advertising initiatives. I recommend you read the **VIEWPOINT** articles, "Enhance and Extend Traditional Relationships First" and "E-Mail Marketing – A Retailer Dream Come True" for discussion of online marketing strategies.

In this **VIEWPOINT**, I have only reviewed the essentials of establishing an online presence for your business. Once you have developed your website and have had it published, you will be able to monitor online customer use of your site. As you review the measured performance of your website, you may choose to revise your site, perhaps adjusting your site's design or expanding your site's content and customer services.

To help you gain maximum benefit from your business website, I recommend you regularly visit [www.bricksNclicksPROFITS.com](http://www.bricksNclicksPROFITS.com) to get the latest in Internet-integration advice - from **VIEWPOINT** and from the wide variety of web-strategy articles linked by bricksNclicksPROFITS.com.

Happy retailing,

Peter

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