How to Start a eBusiness

A)   The first step in choosing a name is obviously to try to register the name of your business with a .com at the end. Unfortunately, this isn't as cut-and-dried as it sounds because all the good names are most likely taken, by means of the time you read this, the name you want will most likely have been snatched up by someone else. If the .com version of your name is gone and you can't buy it from the owner, try .net or. Org. New domain names like .biz, Info and .us are also available but not used as widely. If even those are taken, you can register your name in one of the more than 100 non-U.S. top-level domains (TLDs) like .cc and .nu. The drawback is that these don't have the recognition of. Com-and your prospects will automatically slap on a .com if your domain name hasn't imprinted itself on their noggins.

B)   With your Web site authored, you need a place to stow it so visitors can access it--and you have hundreds of choices. Many of these hosts are free, and few cost more than $20 per month. Truth is, setting up your own host--a dedicated computer that's permanently wired into the Net--is time-consuming and expensive and, for most small businesses, a bad idea. Better to outsource hosting to folks who specialize in it.

You could use the free space that comes with your ISP account--all providers, from AOL to EarthLink, offer users at least some space as part of the basic package of services. Frankly, though, this space is rarely suited to running a business. Servers are slow during peak traffic hours, and domain names can be cumbersome. This space may be great for putting up test pages and fiddling with a site before you are ready to go live, but when you want to get down to business, you will need a dedicated host.

Picking a host is tricky. Thousands of services charge countless fees, make all sorts of promises and raise seemingly endless questions. To help choose one that'll get the job done, here are key questions to ask, answers to insist on and information on how to get them.

- **How reliable is your service?** Surveys show reliability is e-businesses' main concern. Look for at least a 95 percent uptime guarantee, and find out what that guarantee means, advises Jon Landry, sales manager with TopHosts.com, a Web-host rating service and directory in Toronto.
- **What kind of performance do you offer?** An ideal host has one or more T3 lines connected directly to the Internet, not through someone else's network operations center, says Landry. Servers should be fast Pentium Pros or Sun SparcStations, running Windows NT, Linux or another mainstream, high-performance operating system. Let your host know if you use bandwidth-gobbling features like streaming audio and video.

    And know who you share space with, Silberman adds. If other businesses on your server experience large spikes in traffic, you could suffer.

- **How good is your support?** Look for 24/7 phone support available from a live person. Then check it. Call or e-mail the tech support line at 9 p.m. on a Sunday and expect it to be answered.
- **What will it cost?** Entry-level service with a single domain name, 20MB hard-drive space, e-mail service and up to 1GB of monthly data transfer (which may also be expressed as hits) should cost no more than $50.
- **How do you handle security?** Passwords should be required to control the host and manage or modify your site. All files should be backed up daily. Always look for a host that offers secure transactions.
- **How much control do I have?** You want to be able to use a variety of background applications, including custom CGI scripts and online forms tailored for your business, says Dave Murphy, president of Damar Group Ltd., a Web hosting company in Elkridge,

Maryland. "Otherwise," he warns, "you won't be able to design a site that really meets your needs."

- **Can you handle the technology I'm using?** If your site's software runs on Microsoft Internet Information Server under Windows NT, look for a host that supports that configuration. Personal referrals help, too. Ask your software company if they know of any good hosts.

Actually comparing hosts can be difficult, so a good policy is to quietly set up an account and test the host--kick the tires, so to speak--for several weeks before announcing your presence to the world. Isn't that expensive? You bet, when setup fees are factored in. But more expensive--and embarrassing--is to make a big push for traffic, only to have your host drop the ball and leave you with cranky visitors who cannot quite make it in. Better to know your host is operating smoothly before inviting guests to the party.

When Your Host Goes Kaput

So you've chosen your host and things are running smoothly. But what happens if your ISP shuts down, declares bankruptcy or otherwise goes out of business? What are your options? And what's your next step?

First, look at your contract with the ISP (hopefully you've kept a copy). Make sure the contract clearly states that you own all your Web site's content--the text, graphics and other "stuff" that people actually see when they look at your site. If this isn't crystal clear, there's a risk your Web site may be considered part of the ISP's bankruptcy estate and sold to a complete stranger, under terms set by the bankruptcy court, without your approval.

Second, make sure your ISP makes two "backup" copies of your Web site on a CD-ROM or Zip disk and delivers them to you so you can keep them in a safe place. "If your ISP won't do this for you, that's a real red flag, and you should look for someone else right away," say Amy and Andy Gideon, founders of [TAG Online Inc.,](#) a full-service Web company and ISP based in Upper Montclair, New Jersey. The backup copies should contain not only the content of your site, but copies of the software tools (for example, the specific version of HTML) that were used in creating your site where this is possible. Some tools may not be on your backup copy because the ISP licenses them from the software vendor and cannot legally provide them to you, but you need to be aware of what these products are. Without knowing exactly what tools were used to create your site, say the Gideons, a new ISP will have to re-create your site from scratch using whatever tools they have at hand. These will not only cost you time and money, but there's no assurance your site will look or perform as it once did.

Third, go to the Network Solutions/VeriSign Web site at [www.netsol.com](#) and make sure your site's domain name (the Internet address that reads "www. .com") is registered in your name. If your domain name is registered in the ISP's name, notify them in writing that they must assign the domain name to you on Network Solutions' records as soon as possible.

Finally, make sure that all your e-mail addresses are tied to your site rather than to your ISP's site. In other words, if your Web site is www.xyz.com and your ISP's is www.ISP.com, then all your e-mail addresses should read whatever@xyz.com, not whatever@ISP.com.

When should you worry about your ISP's health? According to the Gideons, some of the "early warning signs" of ISP disaster are:

- a sudden change in service quality, as when you're told the ISP "doesn't do" something they've always done for you before;
- an increase in outages, or in the time it takes to get back online after a Web failure;

- a reduction in the "redundancy" of the ISP (the number of separate servers assigned by the ISP to perform a specific task, such as e-mail), which makes them more vulnerable if a single server crashes; and
- sudden and frequent changes in the ISP's staff ("When you call the ISP's tech support line, you should get a real person, not voicemail, and messages should not be returned by different people each time you call," the Gideons advise).

When an ISP shuts down, for whatever reason, you're in a state of crisis, the Gideons say. "You need to find an ISP that can help you get back online quickly, without a lot of policies and forms to fill out, because each day your site is 'dark' costs you money," say the Gideons. "When people can't access your Web site, they assume you've gone out of business and they'll go somewhere else."

C)   Copyright
The footer of your site should display a copyright notice for the content of the site. The notice should read "© [date] [copyright owner name] All rights reserved." You should also deposit a copy of the site with the Copyright Office to record ownership of the site's content, look and feel. Finally, under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, depending on the purpose and the users' activities on the site, your company may be eligible to register for limited liability offered by the act for the site. You should consult your attorney for review of the act and how to register.

Domain Name
When building your Web site, domain names are an important part. Often they are directly tied to your business name, your logos and your brand. Businesses often fail to give proper thought to which domain name to choose.

Picking a domain name should have the same careful thought as naming other products or services. Choosing a domain name should include analysis of trademark law in relationship to the name. Under current law, domain names may be awarded to trademark holders over others through arbitration or litigation. This means that having trademark registration in the same name as your domain name may ensure that you retain ownership of the name.

Export
If persons from other countries use your site, then you are exporting. If you sell to such persons, you are exporting the item you sell and entering into contracts with persons of other countries. If you use encryption on the site, then you are exporting technology regulated by the Department of Commerce and Defense. Various government departments regulate the countries with which U.S. companies may do business and when a company needs an export license to transmit items, technology or information abroad. Doing business with certain countries, such as Iraq, Iran, Cuba, North Korea, Syria, Yugoslavia and others, is severely restricted. Depending on the information on your site, what kind of business you do, the technology and information involved, your site may be subject to these regulations, and you should consult with your attorney about these business decisions.

Framing
It is important to be careful how your Web site frames to other sites. There have been trademark cases regarding consumer confusion over which site is which, and which site is the source of the content and data. Also, be careful, because some sites' "terms and conditions" and/or "user agreements" prohibit collecting and reprinting data displayed on the site--even if such data is factual, such as times and places for events.

Giveaways
Sweepstakes, contests, lotteries and giveaways are governed by state and national laws as to

how they must be conducted. Florida and New York require registration with the state if the prizes are over $5,000 in value. Most important, you should have rules outlining the terms and conditions of the giveaway. The rules are an offer from the sponsor, which the entrant accepts by entering. The offer, plus the acceptance, makes a binding contract covering the giveaway.

Home Page
On the footer of the home page of the site, you should have a link to your privacy policy, your user agreement or terms and conditions, and your copyright notice.

Insurance
Be sure that your business insurance covers Web site activities. Often Web site activities are excluded from errors and omissions and other business insurance. Lloyds of London and a few other companies have insurance specifically covering materials and sales via Web sites, including security of credit card numbers and other important data.

Jurisdiction
One of the primary reasons for having a user agreement is to better address the issues of jurisdiction. Under current law, Web site owners may be subject to jurisdiction and law in any state or country where its users are located. Being subject to the law of so many different locations makes trying to comply with the law and trying to assess your risk tricky. An attorney can help you consider which markets are your highest risk and how to lower your risks through consultation with local counsel or blocking users from those regions. Additionally, you should consider that many foreign jurisdictions do not offer protections for intellectual property which are comparable to the U.S. Therefore, if a user in such a region steals content or software from your site, you may have little recourse by law, and a hard battle to fight on foreign soil and in a foreign language.

Kill All the Lawyers
A mean and horrible, horrible joke which Shakespeare penned in Henry VI and which I hear far too often, although never in reference to me.

Linking
When linking to other sites, you should consider two factors. One is what word or image you are using for the link and whether it is a trademark of another site or company. If so, you need the trademark owner's permission to post the company's trademark on your site. Second, you should always link to the home page of a Web site since there have been "deep linking" cases claiming loss of advertising revenue, which would have been gained if the users had been directed through the home page.

Metatags
Courts have not permitted use of another company's trademarks as metatags on competitors' sites. These cases arose when company A used company B's trademarked term in the metatagging of company A's site so that when a user looked for company B, company A would come up in the listing. For example, it would not be permitted for Coke to use the metatag "Pepsi" on the Coke Web site.

Notification
Under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, there are required procedures for someone to notify a Web site that materials on the site may infringe on that person's copyright. If the Digital Millennium Copyright Act applies, these procedures should be outlined in a notification policy on the site.

Obscenity
Materials that are considered "obscene" by state or federal law are not permitted on the Internet

and, especially, may not be viewed by children. What is obscene is based on the local standards of the viewing community. This makes prior determinations of what is acceptable somewhat complex. If you have questions about your site and its content, you should review them with your attorney.

Privacy Policy

If you collect any information from users of your site, using cookies or otherwise, the Federal Trade Commission requires you to have a privacy policy. The privacy policy should contain an explanation of how you collect the users' information, how and where the information is stored, how the user can delete or change the information, and to whom the information is disclosed and for what purpose. The European Union also has similar and strict regulations on collection of information via Web sites.

Quick, call Judith Silver with your legal questions...

Rules for Mail Order

The FTC and some states have guidelines for selling items by mail, which have been extended to cover Internet sales. These guidelines cover return policies, customer contact and other information about how to inform your customers about your products, shipping and sales procedures.

SEC

The Securities and Exchange Commission considers a Web site a means of disclosing information to the public about a company. Therefore any information disclosed on your Web site should be given the same review and consideration that your company gives all public disclosures with regard to "forward-looking statements" and "material" information.

Trademark

Trademarking the name of your company, logo, mottos and domain name is an important part of your business development and should be reflected on your Web site. Your nationally registered marks should display an ® and unregistered marks should display a ™ or SM.

User Agreement

Having a user agreement or "terms and conditions" may be the most important part of a Web site. A user agreement requires each user to agree to be bound by a contract governing his or her use of the site by clicking "I agree" before being permitted to use the site. Be aware that simply posting your legal agreement without forcing the user to click "I agree" prior to use is unlikely to bind your users to the terms. The user must take an active step through which she agrees to the terms and must not be allowed to proceed to use the site without such step.

A user agreement allows a company to:

- dictate how the site may be used (for example, for reading and printing materials)
- dictate how the site may not be used (for example, reverse engineering the coding tricks, copying content, for illegal purposes)
- dictate who may use the site (for example, persons over 18, US citizens)
- dictate procedures or policies for the site (for example, return policies, complaint policies, notification of copyright infringement policies)
- dictate your company's waiver of implied legal warranties (for example, implied warranties of noninfringement, fitness for particular purposes, etc.)
- dictate the limit of your company's liability for the site, other users postings on your site, sites you link to, etc.
- dictate jurisdiction for any disputes relating to the site

View Source

The ability for users to view the source code of nearly all Web sites by using the "view source" command in browsers' means that the source code for your Web site is not protectable by trade secret law. For something to be protected by trade secret law, it must not be publicly known, the owner must take some effort to keep the information secret, and the information must have monetary value to the owner. If the information is publicly available on the Web through "view source," the information is not a trade secret.

Warranties

Statements on your Web site about your products and services are express warranties to customers. It is important to carefully review all Web site text to be sure that what your company promises is true and corresponds with its other policies and advertising.

When you review, look for statements that are absolute statements, which may be hard to prove or verify if the Federal Trade Commission were to request that you do so. Examples of such statements are: "Our printer works with all software," "Our services are the best," and "We guarantee that our product will always perform perfectly." Also, be aware that the FTC has specific guidelines that should be followed for use of the words "free" and "guarantee" in advertising or on your Web site.

Also, review your Web site to be sure that the text matches your regular business contracts. For example, your Web site should not promise a 60-day money-back guarantee if your contract states only a 30-day warranty.

Your Risk

The law is all about risk. The more time and money you spend following laws and regulations governing your business, the lower your risks of fines or successful claims by government or third parties.

D)   The number-one question on the minds of new Web site builders is, how do I arrange to accept credit cards for payments?

A good first place to start your search for merchant status is your own bank. Most issue credit cards, and if you have a long-term relationship, that's a big plus. Your bank says no? Try a few other local banks--offering to move *all* your accounts--and you just may be rewarded with merchant status.

You may also try other companies that specialize in issuing accounts to online merchants, including:

- Cardservice International
- VeriSign
- Credit Card Processing Services
- The Processing Network
- 21st Century Resources

Or log onto Google and search for credit card processing. You'll find many dozens of outfits, large and small, that are on the prowl for start-ups seeking merchant accounts.

Credit cards aren't processed cheaply, however, at least not for a start-up. A typical fee schedule for a small-volume account (fewer than 1,000 transactions monthly) would include start-up fees amounting to around $200 and monthly processing fees of around $20.

Making Customers Feel Secure
The one must-have for online credit card processing: secure, encrypted connections. You've seen this many times yourself. Go to virtually any major e-tailer, commence a purchase, and you are put into a "secure server" environment, where transaction data is scrambled to provide a measure of safety against hackers. Truth is, these worries are generally unfounded--the odds of a hacker grabbing an unencrypted credit card number from a nonsecure Web site are pretty slender--but buyers feel reassured when they see they're entering a secure site, and that means you need to provide it.

Is this a technical hassle for you? It shouldn't be. Whatever vendor sells you credit card processing should also, as part of the package, provide a secure transaction environment. If they don't, look elsewhere.

Fraud Prevention Tools
Contrary to reports of rising fraud rates, credit card payments remain one of the safest payment methods available online. Sophisticated Internet solutions, such as the LinkPoint Secure Payment Gateway, process credit card payments in real time using Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) technology, which encrypts all confidential information during the transmission and authorization of transactions.

Other fraud-prevention tools, such as the Address Verification Service (AVS), make online credit card acceptance even safer. The service compares the numerical information in your customers' addresses with records stored by card-issuing banks. It then returns codes that indicate whether the numbers match. Although the information provided by the AVS does not affect the authorization of your transactions, it can help you make informed decisions about suspicious orders.

Besides the AVS, you can protect yourself by using the card validation code 2 (CVC2) and the card verification value (CVV2) verification systems of MasterCard and Visa, respectively. These verification services use the three-digit codes printed on all MasterCard and Visa cards to help you determine whether your customers possess legitimate cards.

Special e-Considerations
Be sure to ask prospective processors about the costs of storefront solutions that you must have to effectively operate your Web site, such as shopping carts, Web hosting, payment gateways, virtual terminals, virtual checks, databases for fulfilling orders, customer tracking, and a way to calculate tax and shipping charges.

Shop around for a credit card processor that best suits your needs. Talk to several different processors and don't be afraid to ask questions. Find out about:

- **The discount rate:** The percentage of each transaction paid to the merchant account provider. If your monthly charges are less than a certain volume, the processor may charge a higher percentage.
- **Transaction fee**: A flat rate charged for each transaction processed.
- **Equipment:** Some examples include point-of-sale terminals, printers and peripherals. Also find out about installation costs. (This may or may not apply to you as an e-business.)
- **Monthly minimum fees:** These are minimum fees that the merchant account provider collects each month from the merchant if the merchant's discount rate and transaction fees don't add up to the monthly minimum specified on the original merchant application. It is usually about $25 per month if the monthly minimum volume isn't reached.

- **Reserve fees:** If your credit history is in question, or if you own a new or high-risk business, you may be required to set up a reserve account, which protects the processor from any future losses. The reserve account is calculated as a percentage of your sales.
- **Chargeback fees:** These are the costs charged by a processor to cover disputed charges.

Other Payment Options

- **Money orders.** For customers who don't have credit cards, money orders are a great payment alternative, particularly if you sell your products in an online auction environment, such as eBay. Services like BidPay.com allow your customers to purchase Western Union-branded money orders with their credit, debit or charge cards. BidPay.com then sends the money orders to you, along with e-mail notification that your customers' payments are on the way.
- **Existing checking accounts.** Services that transfer checking account funds electronically are another quick and easy option for customers without credit cards. Western Union's MoneyZap service, for example, lets buyers pay merchants online from their existing checking accounts.
- **Check cards.** Offline debit cards--aka check cards--are typically issued by large credit card companies through their participating banks. U.S. consumers today make the majority of their offline debit purchases with the Visa Check Card or MasterCard's MasterMoney card. These enhanced ATM cards carry the Visa and MasterCard logos, respectively, and may be used everywhere the credit cards are accepted, including over the Internet.

Customers who make check card purchases in the physical world sign drafts that authorize merchants to charge their accounts. On the Web, customers enter check card information into browser-based forms, just as they would if they were making credit card purchases. The data is encrypted, captured by the transaction processor's secure payment gateway, and sent to the credit card processing networks for authorization. Transactions normally settle in two to three business days.

- **Electronic checks.** These are another emerging e-payment option. Through a process called check conversion, brick-and-mortar merchants can transform their customers' paper checks into electronic transactions that are processed through the automated clearing house (ACH) network. Funds are automatically deposited into their merchant accounts, usually within 48 hours. To perform check conversions, a storeowner must have an account with an electronic-check service provider as well as a magnetic-ink character recognition (MICR) check reader or a payment terminal that supports check conversion.
- **Internet checks.** You can also accept checks over the Internet using payment-processing software, such as LinkPoint International's VirtualCheck. Customers who elect to make check purchases from a Web site are prompted to key their information into a browser-based form. Again, data is encrypted and captured by the transaction processor's payment gateway. Funds from approved transactions are debited from customers' accounts and transferred via the ACH network into merchants' accounts in 10 to 14 days. Merchants can enjoy peace of mind as well as convenience if they use check-guarantee services when they process Internet-checks.
- **PayPal.** Based in Mountain View, California, PayPal is the world's largest online payment system. Recently acquired by eBay, PayPal lets consumers send money to anyone with an e-mail address through their credit card or checking account. Consumers sign up once for the free service-after that, they use their account number to buy products online securely, conveniently and cost-effectively. The cost-effectiveness of PayPal for e-tailers is demonstrated in several scenarios. For example, if entrepreneurs have sales of $250 per month, they pay a credit card company about 35 percent of every transaction, and if

that number goes up to $7,500 per month, they only pay about 5 percent. But PayPall always charges 3.3 percent, says a Gartner vice president. It's also easy to use. A merchant adds PayPal's "Web Accept" button to its site; customers then click on the button and pay with their PayPal account. The payment is processed and sent directly to the merchant's account, then the customer is returned to the Web site

Just because some merchant account providers lump e-businesses in with other high-risk businesses, like telemarketers, merchants in the travel and cruise industries and Internet auctions, it doesn't have to mean you won't be able to open a merchant account. It does mean, though, that it may be more challenging to set one up. Merchant account providers--banks and independent sales organizations--will also consider how long you've been in business, your credit history and any previous merchant accounts you've held with other processors.

Your length of time in business matters because merchant account providers want an assurance that you understand the business environment in which you operate, can identify the potential risks you face, know how to prevent or reduce fraud, and understand how to manage credit card acceptance. Regardless of risk, this kind of knowledge comes only with first-hand business experience.

Your credit report will show how well you've repaid past loans, and if you've had any liens, judgments or bankruptcies filed against you. A favorable credit history will go a long way toward establishing your credibility as a prospective merchant.

And if you've had an earlier, well-maintained merchant account, it's a positive indicator of how you're going to deal with your new processor. Terminated merchant accounts will show up on the Member Alert to Control High-Risk Merchants file, also known as the Combined Terminated Merchant File. If your previous processor terminated your merchant account because you defaulted on it, or if you incurred too many chargebacks, this may negatively impact opening a future account.

To increase your merchant account eligibility, follow these tips:

- **Ensure a positive credit rating.** Remove any past bankruptcies, late payments or liens from your credit report before you apply for a merchant account. To obtain your credit report, contact a credit reporting bureau such as TRW or a company that provides merged credit reports from major reporting agencies, such as Equifax, Experian or Trans Union. Write to them, explain that these matters have been cleared up and ask that they're removed from your credit report. Whether you own a small or large business, having a good credit rating will make a lasting and favorable impression with a transaction processor.
- **Be honest about previous merchant accounts, bankruptcies, liens or judgments.** By acknowledging past financial challenges, you improve your credibility and may encounter one less barrier to opening a new merchant account. You cannot hide information that's part of the public record.
- **Be willing to pay higher fees or accommodate special account requirements.** If you need to abide by special restrictions or pay slightly higher fees in order to open a merchant account, by all means do it! It's worth it to provide your customers with as many noncash payment options as possible. It will help you generate revenues and stimulate impulse purchases.

E)   Businesses selling a service--or thinking about selling a service--over the Web face a few unique challenges that warrant special discussion.

Challenge #1: You are the product. When you sell a service, you are the product, whether you're a real estate agent, doctor, lawyer, bed & breakfast owner, auto-mechanic, caterer, hair stylist, fitness trainer, accountant, investment advisor, childcare provider, housekeeper, dog walker, landscaper...whatever. You're selling your time with the promise of a particular result as opposed to a tangible product.

Challenge #2: Your time is limited. Unlike someone selling a physical product that can be stored and shipped on demand, you can only provide as many services as your time allows. And assuming you pause to sleep and eat like the rest of us, this means you're limited to an 8-hour day. (Okay, 12- to 16-hour days if you love your work as much as I do.)

Challenge #3: You must prove your ability to deliver measurable results, while emphasizing flexibility. People will want to see proof that you've delivered great results for other clients, but they'll also want to know that you're flexible enough to meet their own unique needs. So you must walk a fine line, making sure that you keep confidential client information confidential, while (1) proving that you've satisfied the needs of other clients like them with great results and (2) demonstrating your ability to customize your service to meet their personal, unique needs.

Challenge #4: You're using a global medium to attract local business. Service-based businesses frequently rely on local clients. Sure, the owner of a bed & breakfast in Seattle may be thrilled to be attracting clients from Australia's Gold Coast. But is the landscaper in Seattle going to be equally receptive to securing a weekly hedge trimming and lawn-mowing client from Australia? Probably not. So service-based sites that rely on local customers need to actively pursue sources of local traffic.

In order to overcome these challenges, there are several strategies you can employ.

Strategy #1: Establish your credibility. When you sell a service, you're typically selling a relationship with yourself. And this requires spending more time and effort establishing your credibility and developing a rapport with your visitors than is typically required on a site selling a physical product.

For example, a site that sells a product like gift baskets might include some brief "About Us" information that gives details about who the Web site owners are, why they started their business and how long they've been online. However, the majority of the site would focus on establishing the value of the actual product--the gift baskets--and providing detailed information about guarantees, delivery procedures, etc. Including reams of misplaced information about the Web site owners could actually hurt sales more than help because, in this case, visitors' chief focus should be directed to the value of the product.

When you're selling a service, however, you are the product. So establishing your credibility-- essentially establishing your value--is critical to closing the sale. You need to not only establish the benefits of the service you're offering but also establish the value of you providing this service.

There are a few different ways you can accomplish this. First, you should include a good, professional picture of yourself. And no, the picture of you in your Hawaiian-print shorts and "Kiss the Chef" hat from last year's summer barbecue won't do. Giving your visitors a professional image to associate you with will go a long way toward establishing your credibility.

Next, you need to include a list of your credentials. However, don't just give point after point of accomplishments; be sure to state exactly how each of your credentials is going to translate into a benefit for your clients. Don't make the critical mistake of assuming that visitors to your site can

make this leap on their own. Clearly spell out the benefits you offer in your sales copy. For example, if you're a real estate agent with certification in housing inspection, you shouldn't just tell your visitors "I'm a certified housing inspector." Instead you should say, "Not only can I find the best home in the best location for you and your family, but as a certified housing inspector, I can give you an accurate assessment of the home's structural soundness and let you know about any potential problems to make sure you avoid getting stuck with costly repairs in the years to come!" Doesn't that sound better than "I'm a certified housing inspector"? Make the benefit obvious!

You'll also need to provide evidence that other clients have been satisfied with your services. Depending on the nature of the service you provide, you may choose to do this in a few different ways. Testimonials from clients are a great way to establish your credibility. An online portfolio of your work might be another option (for example, landscapers might include pictures of well-manicured properties they designed and maintain). However, if the confidentiality of your clients is important, you may need to approach this a bit differently by including more general descriptions of problems you've encountered and steps you've taken to solve them, with no names or clues that could give away identities. If privacy is important to your clients, then visitors to your site should be able to understand why you can't reveal names and exact details. But again, don't assume they'll know. Be sure to explain this.

Strategy #2: Be specific about exactly what you're offering. We've already talked a bit about this, but this is such a common mistake I see Web site owners making--whether they're selling a service or a product--that I think it warrants further explanation.

You can never assume that providing information about what you've done for other clients will enable visitors to your site to make that leap and picture what you'll be able to do for their businesses. You need to be very, very specific about what you're offering. To help you do that, look at other similar service providers and ask yourself these questions:

- Do you offer the same services? More? Less?
- What makes you different from your competitors?
- Do you specialize in anything?
- What kind of guarantee do you offer?
- How will your services be delivered?

Too often, Web site owners fail to provide their visitors with enough information. Sales copy with a detailed breakdown of the services you provide, with the benefits you offer clearly explained, will be one of the most critical aspects of your site.

Strategy #3: Demonstrate your flexibility. As I mentioned earlier, people will not only want to see proof that you've delivered great results for other clients, they'll want to know that you're prepared to customize your service to meet their own unique needs.

So here, again, thorough sales copy that clearly explains how you're willing to customize your services will be very important. Do your clients typically fall into a few different categories? Can you talk about each group and explain how you adapt and change to meet their individual needs?

For example, on his Web site, the owner of a martial arts school offered basic summary descriptions of his classes. Instead of general descriptions, he'd be better off breaking his sales copy down from his existing summary descriptions into more detailed copy that explains the key differences between his child, teen, and adult classes. By focusing on these client groups separately, he could more closely target their unique needs (and therefore attract more customers) by emphasizing the benefits that apply directly to each.

Strategy #4: Make it easy for leads to contact you. Here's another obvious one. But I bring it up because I'm continually shocked by how difficult some sites make it for visitors to contact them. If you're selling a service over the Web, then you're generating leads--your goal is to compel visitors to contact you. But just as someone selling a product over the Web needs to make a seamless transition between their sales copy and their order form, you need to make a seamless transition between your sales copy and the point of contact.

You need to make it easy for your visitors to contact you. Provide an online form, your e-mail address, phone number, fax number, physical mailing address and any other relevant information (like the best times to call you). And make sure this information is highly visible and easily accessible from every page of your site. Why not invite a few honest friends to check out your site and time them to see how long it takes for them to find your contact information? What's obvious to you may not be obvious to the rest of the world.

Strategy #5: Network and get listed in local directories. While almost all the traffic techniques used to drive visitors to product-based sites can be applied to service-based sites, I'd like to mention a few that those of you who need local traffic will find useful.

1. **Network with other local businesses.** If you want local traffic, start making personal connections with other local business owners--preferably those with sites of their own. Look for ways to position your service and your site as a resource to their customers, and then request a link on their site or get permission to leave your business cards (printed with your URL, of course) in their lobby or next to their cash register. Even consider rewarding local business owners for sending traffic and leads your way by offering them a special gift, a discount off your service or even a portion of the profits.
2. **Get your site listed in local online directories.** There are plenty of local online directories that list only two or three businesses in categories that should be quite popular. With consumers becoming more comfortable searching for information online, it only makes sense that they're turning to these local directories to hire local services with increasing frequency. Why not take advantage of the fact that few businesses are pursuing this valuable source of traffic? Look up local online directories in your area and request a listing.
3. **Take advantage of sites like eLance.com.** Depending on the type of service you offer, professional services marketplaces like eLance.com and FreeLance.com may be a great source of clients and leads. Post your qualifications and bid on posted jobs, using your Web site to help close the deal once you've entered into a one-on-one discussion with a potential client.

Strategy #6: Encourage referrals and repeat customers. Always, always, always follow up with existing clients! Are they happy with the job you did for them? Is there anything else you can do for them? Do they know anyone else who might benefit from your service? E-mail has made following up with your existing clients extremely easy and cost-effective, so there's no excuse for not taking advantage of this source of easy extra income. Don't be afraid to remind previous customers that you're there. And don't be afraid to ask for referrals. If you've done a good job for someone, they'll likely be more than happy to refer their friends and business associates to you. But if you don't ask, they'll rarely think to do it. Don't leave this to chance.

The only real difference between selling a service vs. a product over the Web is your focus: When you sell a physical product, every aspect of your site design and sales copy focuses on how the product is going to solve visitors' needs and benefit them. When you sell a service over the Web, the focus is on how you're going to solve visitors' needs and benefit them.

Once you've wrapped your head around this concept, everything else should fall into place. Sales copy strategies...traffic-generation techniques...Web site design strategies...all the techniques

and strategies I've mentioned above can be used to dramatically increase the leads you attract, the deals you close and your overall online income.

Site Design and Content

F) Countless small businesses rely on Web consultants every day to design and build their Web sites, enhance existing sites, and put together the pieces of each company's distinctive e-commerce strategy. If you're trying to get your company's site up and running, you can choose among independent site developers, Web design shops, technology consulting firms, system integrators, traditional advertising and public relations firms, and interactive agencies. Some of these outsource the Web site hosting and site promotion functions, while others keep these functions in-house. In addition, Web design and strategic consulting are often provided by Web hosting companies.

And like the Web consultants themselves, the variety of prices that consultants charge for their services are extreme: They can charge several hundred dollars for a simple site consisting of a few pages to $1 million or more for a more sophisticated e-commerce site with such features as easily updated product databases, search engines, animated product demonstrations, secure online transactions, and audio and video enhancements. In addition, Web consultants vary in how they price their services: Some consultants, typically individual designers, charge by the hour; others, usually Web design firms, charge by the project.

In general, however, experts say that consultants or Web hosting companies can put together a basic, professional-looking Web site for a small business for $1,500 to $5,000 (not including monthly Web hosting service charges), and an e-commerce site for about $10,000 to $50,000.

A word of caution: Finding a Web site consultant can be tricky. Although the Web continues to grow at a rapid pace and has become a useful tool for both buyers and sellers, it's also quite unwieldy. As a result, very few organized associations or Web sites exist to help find reputable Web design firms. So when you do locate a potential design partner, make sure the company you want to work with is reputable. Check out a list of sites the company's worked on and look closely at its own site. Ask about arrangements for maintaining the site, and make sure your new designer is interested in your company and its goals.

Doing It Yourself

If you do choose to do it yourself, first we'll assume you've got a decent computer and the hankering to put your business Web site up for all to see. But you can't do that without amassing an arsenal of Web authoring software. Thankfully, the days of cooking up a Web page by slaving over a hot text document are over. The current crop of HTML editors provides page previews, tag shortcuts and more wizards than Dungeons and Dragons. There's a program out there for every type of entrepreneur, from rank amateur to technophile. Here's how to get started . . .

The Basics

First, how will users see your Web site? The Web community is split between Explorer and Navigator, so it's essential to design your Web site with both in mind. Most HTML appears pretty much the same using either, but the browsers do have numerous, yet small, differences. It's best to test your Web pages in both platforms before launching them online. Check for a consistent appearance, make sure all links function properly, and pay special attention to any frames, tables, JavaScript or plug-ins that your pages use.

Because a lot of surfers don't upgrade their browsers regularly, you should also test with earlier versions (like Netscape 3.0 and Internet Explorer 4.0). You can visit Netscape to download versions of Navigator and Microsoft to download Internet Explorer.

Fortunately, you don't have to memorize all the text tags in HTML 4.01 to put up your Web site. But if you want to take full advantage of programs like CoffeeCup HTML Editor, you may want to check out the libraries of Web-building resources and tutorials at Builder.com and WebMonkey.com.

The Software

Now we're ready to tackle the software that'll do most of the grunt work for you. Before we wander into the Microsoft camp, let's look at Macromedia Dreamweaver and NetObjects Fusion.

In addition to its high-octane Shockwave and Flash Web animation software, Macromedia also makes the popular Dreamweaver for Macintosh or Windows, an HTML editing program that includes features like an integrated text editor for users who already know some HTML, Microsoft Office integration, and Flash buttons and text for adding spice to your site's appearance. Dreamweaver is especially good for integrating multimedia.

If you're not already somewhat familiar with HTML and Web site design, Dreamweaver's palette of advanced features may seem a bit overwhelming. NetObjects Fusion is a less expensive way to try your hand and is also specifically geared toward building sites for businesses. Available for Windows only, Fusion is designed with a drag-and-drop interface, various e-commerce wizards and pre-designed templates that can simplify the process even more.

Then, of course, there's Microsoft. Its HTML editor, FrontPage, offers integration with Microsoft Office and comes with more than 60 business themes to give your site a consistent appearance. To get the most out of your investment, check with your Web hosting provider to see whether it supports FrontPage extensions. Also, visit OutFront.net, a "Microsoft FrontPage Learning Community," for its full stock of Web templates, tutorials, forums and links.

Want Extras?

A good HTML editor will handle most of your Web site building, but sometimes-extra programs add icing to the Web cake. Adobe LiveMotion lets you create Web animations and interactive graphics. With a user interface styled after Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, LiveMotion is especially useful for those of you who have Adobe graphics backgrounds.

NetMechanic offers a host of tools for optimizing your site. Its HTML Toolbox searches pages for HTML coding, link and spelling errors. (You can try it free.) NetMechanic's GIFBot is a freeware program that compresses Web images for faster-loading pages. Never overestimate the patience of a Net surfer when it comes to slow-loading Web sites.

Most important, be sure to choose software that meets your HTML comfort level. Any of the programs we looked at can give your online business presence the room it needs to grow.

Hiring a Software Developer

If you need to go beyond basic e-commerce--say you need to track customers' orders on your site or create a customized internal billing system--then you'll need to hire an altogether different animal: the software developer. Unless you're technically inclined, trying to develop custom applications for your business is like ordering dinner in a foreign country--but with more risk. It's one thing to waste money on a meal you didn't realize you asked for; it's another thing altogether when your company makes the mistake of pouring thousands of dollars into a project that doesn't pan out.

No matter what software development project you want, you can make it succeed even if a technical person isn't on staff. Here are some tips for working with outside developers:

- **Know what you want.** You should have a clear idea of what you expect in the application you're looking for. Drafting a document that details its purpose and desired functionality will convey those expectations to any development firm. If you're converting from a manual process, it's useful to have samples of forms and reports you use and a detailed description of the workflow. Sketching out the way the material could translate onscreen will help the developer understand what you want to get out of your software and could even inspire suggestions to improve efficiency. You might be surprised to see how many manual steps can be eliminated and done automatically via software.

In your first consultation with any developer, include people familiar with your current applications and those who will be using the customized software. Current users can offer additional insight into your software needs, while new users may be better able to explain the specifics of the desired functionality. This should not be the only meeting you have. Just handing over a list of needs and expecting the developer to determine what comes next could be disastrous. To get the best results, you and others on your staff should constantly play an integral part in the development process.

- **Start your search.** Who to hire? You need to determine whether you need a firm or a freelancer. For a project that requires a variety of skill sets, consult firms that can provide a team of people. If your work is not as time-sensitive or as broad in scope, a freelancer should be more than able to address your needs. Rates range from $60 to $175 per hour, or you may want to negotiate to have fees tied to performance or the meeting of deadlines
- **Seek multiple options.** In most cases, you'll have several choices for carrying out your project. Different software, programming languages and even varying sets of skills can be used to accomplish the same result. As you interview potential firms to handle your project, ask why certain approaches are recommended, why they're better than others and what the drawbacks of their recommendations are.
- **Focus on the build vs. buy recommendation.** While some developers will recommend that they build your desired application from scratch, others will work with an existing application and build on top of it. By building an application from scratch, you have the ability to specify exactly what you want, but it might take more time to create. Taking advantage of an existing application can result in quicker turnaround with less expense, but it could also mean limitations in either functionality or interface.

Regardless of the method you choose, be sure to ask potential developers what they think will be the trickiest issues to resolve. Even if you don't understand everything they talk about, you can definitely get a sense of how well-thought-out the recommendations are by the developer's ability to explain his or her position. Also, find out how the software will grow with you. In this ever-changing age of technology, you don't need software that can't change with the times.

- **Find great developers.** Look for developers who are well versed in the programming languages you'll need. Ideally, they'll have built similar applications previously; it's recommended that each person working on the project has at least two years of hands-on experience with the required language. While this should not be a determining factor by any means, it doesn't hurt to find out whether they've provided similar services for other companies with needs like yours. Always ask for--and check--references.

Compare the services offered by different developers and try to get the most for your money. But look beyond their skills; expand your focus and consider the overall software development package. You might not realize where the saving graces will actually lie. For example, one developer might offer to provide several prototypes for you along the way and then use your feedback to make necessary changes before the code is locked down. In the unfortunate event that you need a major redesign on the software, such a provision can save you from potentially draining costs.

Still, a successful project requires more than just great programming. Whether you work with a freelancer or a team of people, you should seek out developers who can create a formal specification--that's a document that details the functionality from a functional and technical perspective. Also look around for developers who "comment code" well--that's tech talk for adding notes that describe what the code does. It's money well spent to ensure that others can extend your application in the future.

- **Test the software thoroughly before bidding your developer farewell.** Even though the software developer should have taken care of this task before delivering the product to you, it's ultimately your responsibility to make sure your new software works correctly. Have qualified staff test the software, have the developer test it in front of you at your company, or hire an independent testing lab to go through and make sure everything works properly.

Despite the many hours spent poring over your needs and the desired results, it's almost a given that changes or minor adjustments will have to be made to the application after installation. Will the developer be able to handle those adjustments after he or she gets your initial feedback? And how will that factor into the price? Don't be caught by surprise at the tail end of this arduous process by a series of "extras"--get answers about costs in the beginning.

The other side of testing is fixing mistakes, or debugging. Will your developer be able to assist with this after the software is installed? Some firms bundle implementation and training into the software development package, so this might just be part of the deal. If it's not, make sure you have a trouble-shooting plan in place before your developer heads for the door. Going one step further, ask your designer what skills are needed to tackle these issues in case you end up scrambling to hire someone specifically to fix the bugs.

- **Get it in writing.** Avoid the blame game by covering details about such niceties as project due dates, payment milestones, code ownership and quality guarantees. If you'll be sharing sensitive information, having potential partners sign a nondisclosure agreement is wise.

It's particularly critical to establish ownership of the software when discussing a software development agreement. You might be surprised to know that ownership of the intellectual property is not an automatic inclusion in the transfer of the software from the developer to the client. Depending on your needs and wants, you could negotiate to be the sole owner, to merely have a license to use the software or any number of options in between.

G) This could probably be called the top 100 mistakes--there are just so many goofs site builders make--but let's narrow the focus to the most disastrous 10. Avoid only these gaffes, and your site will be far better than much of the competition.

1. Not planning your site. Before you begin building your Web site, sit down and define your purposes and goals for your site. Then, map out the flow of your site, starting with your home page through every page that follows, based on your goals. Your site's purpose--whether it's to gather leads for your service business or to sell your homemade confections--should drive the design of the pages and the site. If you start building without a firm idea of what the end product should do and be, it'll be very apparent to your users who'll see a hodgepodge of links and information without a unified message.

2. Failing to put contact information in a plainly seen location. If you're selling, you have to offer visitors multiple ways to connect to you. The smartest route is to put a "Contact Us" button that leads to complete info--phone number, fax number, mailing address. Even if nobody ever calls you, the very presence of this information will comfort some visitors. And always put an e-mail at the bottom of every page.

3. Broken links. Bad links--hyperlinks that do nothing when clicked--are the bane of any surfer. Test your site--and do it weekly, to ensure that all links work as promised.

4. Outdated information. Again, there's no excuse but it's stunning how many site builders lazily leave up pages that long ago ceased to be accurate. When information changes, update the appropriate pages immediately--and this means every bit of information, every fact, even tiny ones. As a small business, you cannot afford the loss of credibility that can come from having even a single factual goof.

5. Too many font styles and colors. Pages ought to present a unified, consistent look, but novice site builders--entranced by having hundreds of fonts at their fingertips plus dozens of colors frequently turn their pages into a garish mishmash. Use two, maybe three fonts and colors per page, maximum. The idea is to reassure viewers of your solidarity and stability, not to convince them you are wildly artistic.

6. Orphan pages. Memorize this: Every page in your site needs a readily seen link back to the start page. Why? Sometimes users will forward a URL to friends, who may visit and may want more information. But if the page they get is a dead-end, forget it. Always put a link to "Home" on every page, and that quickly solves this problem.

7. Disabling the back button. Evil site authors long ago figured out how to break a browser's back button so that when a user pushes it, several undesirable things happen: There's an immediate redirect to an unwanted location, the browser stays put because the back button has been deactivated, or a new window pops up and takes over the screen. Porno site authors are masters of this--their code is often so malicious that frequently the only way to break the cycle is to restart the computer--but this trick has gained currency with other kinds of site builders. My advice: Never do it. All that's accomplished is viewers get annoyed.

8. Opening new windows. Once upon a time, using multiple new frames to display content as a user clicked through a site was cool--a new, new thing in Web design. Now it only annoys viewers because it ties up system resources, slows computer response and generally complicates a surfer's experience. Sure, it's easy to use this tool. But don't.

9. Slow loading times. For personal and hobby sites, slow server times are the norm, and since much of this Web space is free, there's really no complaining. But slow server and page loading times are inexcusable with professional sites. It's an invitation to the visitor to click away. If your server is the culprit, find another host. If your Web pages are to blame, make sure you haven't packed them with too many images and applets.

10. Using leading-edge technology. Isn't that what the Web's all about? Nope, not when you are guaranteed to lose most of your viewers whenever your site requires a download of new software to be properly viewed. Flash is way cool, no question about it, but if nobody actually looks at them, they are just so much waste. Never use bells and whistles that force viewers to go to a third-party site to download a viewing program. Your pages need to be readable with a standard, plain-Jane browser, preferably last year's or earlier. State-of-the-art is cool for tech wizards but death for entrepreneurs.

H)   Your site is up, so now how do you make it special and filled with content that attracts visitors and keeps them coming back? That mission consumes site-builders, both full-time professionals and part-timers, but if there is one fact we now know to be absolutely true, it is this: Simplicity is best.

Case in point: The Web site for a luxury hotel chain based in India features a huge soundtrack of classical music, and it's just annoying. Maybe some sitar tracks--authentic Indian music--might

make sense, but classical? It's bandwidth-hogging craziness. Resist the temptation to put something on your site just because you can. Never put up content that slows access to a page but doesn't demonstrably heighten user value.

What does work? Content that gives users reasons to linger, to absorb more of what you're offering. You'll find there are many, many ways to introduce this content, and you are going to have to exercise real discretion here. Pick a few tools, try them out, monitor user responses, then delete the ones that aren't proving valuable. Be ruthless here, and never forget that simple is better.

That understood, here are many tasty tools for you to use in beefing up your site. Just remember, this may be an all-you-can-eat buffet, but the more you put on your plate, the more discomfort your Web site viewers will feel.

- **E-mail Lists.** You want to experiment with a tool that lets customers talk among themselves about your products and services? An e-mail list gives you that capability. The smartest, simplest way to create a list is at areas like Yahoo! Groups. There are many options available. Lists can be private, open only to members you approve, or public, open to all who knock on the door. My advice: Experiment with several types of lists, perhaps a private one for existing customers and a public one for all comers.

Either way, carefully monitor traffic. To be useful, a list needs a steady flow of traffic and at least a few messages daily. Initially, you might encourage friends and colleagues to post just to get the list going, but eventually you'll need a site that generates sufficient traffic or your lists will collapse from nonuse. When they work (and they often do), lists are a fast way to spice up a site with the kind of interactivity that keeps surfers coming back.

- **Polls.** Polls, where surfers register their opinion on an issue, are at the heart of the Net because this is interactivity in its most basic form. Ask any question--"Should pornography be banned from the Web?" "What's your favorite cocktail?" "Who's your favorite Beatle?" It doesn't matter: Surfers will want to register their point of view and see how others voted. AOL has long used polls as a staple on its pages. Learn from the masters and do likewise.

Writing a poll from scratch is a trick bit of coding, but free poll templates are readily available for insertion into your site. All you have to do is fill in the blanks in a template, copy and paste a bit of code into your site, and you're in business. Sources of such templates are plentiful, but a good one is from Freepolls.com.

- **Weblog (blog).** At its most basic, a blog is a frequently updated, timed and dated online journal with a good dose of links involved. That may not sound like much to get excited about, but it has gone beyond fad to become a full-fledged Internet phenomenon. The elements of interactivity, community and collaboration will be key as growing businesses adopt blogs for customer relations, advertising, promotion and even internal communications. One well-known business example is software company Macromedia's use of blogging to keep customers updated on what's happening with its products.
- **Chat rooms.** Wouldn't it be cool if your site had its own private real-time chat room? It's both easy to put up and free from LiveUniverse http://liveuniverse.com. Just search the page for the link to the chat tool, register and in a matter of minutes you'll be able to put folks to chatting.

Before you do, however, mull on this: Empty chat rooms look very, very dumb. Will you have enough traffic to put people into a chat room on a regular basis? Do you want to monitor it? How frequently? Know that you won't be on call 24/7--but the chat room will, theoretically, be available that often. My advice: For most small sites, this is a tool to avoid.

Better by far is to set yourself up with a free [AOL](#), [Yahoo!](#) or [MSN](#) instant messenger account where visitors can fire off questions to you if you're online. This gives surfers an alternative to e-mail for finding information, but doesn't expose you to the ridicule that comes with offering an unpopulated chat room. Do this in combination with providing a message board, and surfer needs ought to be very adequately handled.

- **Guest books.** Sure, you could create a guest book using a CGI script, but probably the easier way is to insert some HTML code into your page--and you will find it at [1-2-3 Web Tools](#). Why would you want a guest book at all? It's a convenient way to collect more information about your visitors. And incidentally, surfers often like to look through guest books.
- **News feeds, content and more.** A secret traffic-builder of the big Web sites is regularly changing content. Usually that means paying writers and other content creators big bucks to produce copy, but you don't need to spend that kind of money.

There are plenty of legitimate ways to get new content without having to write it all yourself. If you have a special interest site, many of your readers may enjoy contributing occasional stories, just for the thrill of seeing their names in virtual print. Also, if you see an article you like somewhere on the Net, you may be able to get permission to reprint it. I get requests like these on a regular basis, and I'm usually more than happy to grant permission. If it's a small site, I don't ask for money; if it's a large one, sometimes just the extra exposure and an added link back to my own Web site is adequate compensation.

Another common technique is to incorporate a newsfeed onto your site. This can be done a lot cheaper than you would imagine, and it automatically keeps your site updated with a fresh news section. The process is simple: The newsfeed provider simply gives you a piece of code, which you paste directly onto your Web page. They take it from there. The news window that this code makes appear on your site links back directly to their own news server, constantly updating the content in the background. Two places to look for newsfeeds are [Screamingmedia](#) and [iSyndicate](#). If you're on a tighter budget, there are free or very low-cost models that often supplement their content with advertising. You can find a list of free sources at [FreeSticky](#). But examine the content carefully before incorporating it--some of the free content may be nothing more than a thinly disguised advertisement for something unrelated to your Web site's mission.

- **Daily content.** As simple as it sounds, many Web visitors appreciate sites that offer a "tip of the day" and visit them on a daily basis, often in the morning, to glean the day's tip. Or, they subscribe to a daily newsletter full of tips--and advertising. Many sites offer philosophical tips, which assist readers in reflecting on various aspects of their lives. For example, sites that encourage positive thinking offer some daily message of optimism. Religious sites offer daily prayers. Literary sites offer quotes from famous authors. Humor sites offer daily jokes.

To start, you don't have to come up with 365 of them; instead work on one month's set of tips. Then, say one month ahead. It helps to consult a calendar for the coming year so you can align your tips with the days of the week, holidays and other special occasions. When you consume all 365 tips (or less if you choose just to update Monday through Friday), feel free to dispense the same tips again for the coming year. Few Web site visitors, even those who visited your site every day to read the daily tip, will be aware or concerned that one year's set of tips was the same as the last. In subsequent years, however, it probably does make sense to develop new sets of tips. You can only run the same information for so long.

Customer Service

I) a must when building your Web site is writing a privacy policy and posting it boldly on your site--it's a necessity today for building consumer confidence.

A good policy includes a description of how data is collected and used; a way to allow users to choose not to provide data or permit their data to be shared; and a description of the procedure for users who want to request or update data. You can also follow fair-information practices laid out by the FTC. And remember: Once a privacy policy is posted on your Web site, you'd better adhere to it, or you can expect to find yourself in legal trouble.

A good privacy policy should cover questions anybody visiting your site might have. Tell people what's being gathered, by whom and for what purpose. Visitors should also be told their options for participating in your information-gathering. Your privacy policy will need to address the following:

- Reveal what personally identifiable information is being collected through your Web site, including that which is automatically collected when users log on. For instance, you may want to state that your business collects information on visitors' Internet addresses and browser types to help with site maintenance.
- Identify the particular business collecting the information. So include your company name and contact information (which you should have prominently posted anyway).
- Tell your visitors how the information will be used. Is it for shipping and billing purposes? Do you share the information with anyone else? Inform visitors about choices they have concerning the collection, use and sharing of that information. If visitors must register and provide information, allow them to opt not to receive newsletters or other e-mail.
- Describe security procedures used to protect visitor data from loss, misuse or alteration, including your secure server and encryption methods.
- Let them know how they can view the information you have collected on them and correct any inaccuracies.

Be ready to adapt standards to your business and your customers. Privacy is obviously a bigger concern with certain kinds of companies, such as financial-services providers.

You can download a fill-in-the-blank privacy statement at Truste.com, a nonprofit organization in San Francisco, or apply for a privacy seal, as we explain below.

Online Seal Programs
Think of online seal programs as a Better Business Bureau for the Web. It works like this: If a business follows certain privacy rules, it's allowed to display a seal of approval on its Web site. Customers logging on to your site will feel more confident buying your wares; the seal offers proof that your business takes privacy seriously and uses the information collected in a responsible way.

Two leading privacy-seal programs are TRUSTe (Trusted Universal Standards in Electronic Transactions), based in Cupertino, California, and BBBOnLine, a subsidiary of the Council of Better Business Bureaus (BBB) in Arlington, Virginia. To include either of these programs' privacy seals on its Web site, a company must agree to post a privacy statement that's easily accessed and understood; further, the business must implement privacy principles that reflect fair-information practices.

The TRUSTe seal is awarded only to those sites that adhere to TRUSTe's privacy principles and comply with TRUSTe's verification and consumer-resolution processes. The rules state that participating companies must inform customers of what kind of personal information is collected, how it's used and with whom the information will be shared, as well as the site's policy on correcting and updating the visitors' information. Additionally, companies must give users the opportunity to opt out of having their personal information given away (or sold). TRUSTe's program costs $499 for a company with yearly sales less than $500,000 and the price increases as a company's sales increase.

Similarly, the BBBOnLine privacy program is also designed to assure consumers that their information will be safe in your particular corner of cyberspace, and its requirements are similar to TRUSTe's. The Better Business Bureau backs BBBOnLine's privacy seal; to participate, a company must be a member of the BBB. All applicants pay an annual assessment evaluation fee based on the company's sales. Don't expect anything too exorbitant: For companies with total sales of $1 million or less, membership in the program costs $200. You can also apply for a Kid's Privacy Seal, which was developed to help businesses comply with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act.

The Direct Marketing Association (DMA), a trade group in New York City, has an online guide to help entrepreneurs develop a privacy-policy statement. The guide encourages companies to complete a questionnaire and create a privacy-policy statement consistent with the association's Privacy Principles for Online Marketing, which are similar to the seal programs' principles mentioned above.

Marketing Your Site

J)   Once your customers click on the "Pay Now" button and you've filled their orders, you may not be finished with them: After receiving the product, they may decide it's not what they wanted. And getting the product back isn't always so simple. You'll likely be in contact with them numerous times, and you'll have to process a refund and restock the product once you've received it. There's almost more to the return than the steps involved in the original sale. Suffice to say, customer returns can often be very time-, process- and cost-intensive.

According to Forrester Research, one out of every 10 products sold will be returned. Of course this figure will vary based on the types of products sold online. But why not take a proactive approach by providing online processing of customer returns? Shipping companies such as the U.S. Postal Service (USPS), FedEx and UPS are providing technology and services for the online e-tailer to ease the process of handling returns. These services make returns more convenient for your customers by allowing them to quickly print return labels and have the product immediately picked up.

Your Options

There are a number of ways to handle returns, but one particularly popular way is to provide customers with return labels that can be placed on packages to be sent back to the fulfillment center or business. The U.S. Postal Service (USPS) was the first to offer a system to allow customers to print return labels straight from their own PCs. Called Returns@ease, it works like this: After customers alert you that they want to return items, you can provide them with merchandise return labels via the Web so they can return the packages by mail.

To use Returns@ease, you must obtain a merchandise return permit from the USPS and set up an account at a local post office. The registration application, programming codes and applicable guidelines for using the service can be found online at USPSPriorityMail.com. The service is free to customers and doesn't require additional hardware or software. Keep in mind, though, that there's a minimum charge to merchants of 30 cents per return, plus postage and any fees for special services such as shipping insurance and delivery confirmation.

UPS also has an e-returns service that provides consumers with a label they can print from their PCs. But the UPS system has additional functions. For example, "[If your customer returns a CD because] he changed his mind, the system can ship it back to the merchant for restocking," says Steve Holmes of UPS. "But if the CD was returned because it was defective, the system knows immediately to put the name and address of the manufacturer on the return label so it can be returned under warranty."

Once packages are shipped, you and your customers can keep track of the status of those packages directly from your Web site or via the UPS Web site. Customers can hand return packages to any of UPS' 70,000 drivers, or--depending on your return policy--UPS drivers can pick up the packages at consumers' homes. Based on your return policy, you'll be charged a transaction fee and various transportation charges, which are billed to you or your customer once you receive the items from each return.

FedEx Return Manager is an automated Net solution. You can either send customers a return FedEx shipping label via e-mail or arrange for a driver to pick up the product. It's easy for customers and allows you to check the status of the shipment as it's returned to you.

If you're not ready for all this technology, post a clear return policy on your site so customers are aware of your return policies and procedures. This will reduce the number of phone calls on your end. In addition, it will make your customers feel more confident about making an initial purchase if they know there's a way out just in case the product isn't just what they wanted.

Pay Someone Else to Do It for You

Many netpreneurs, not wanting to handle the return process themselves, turn instead to returns management solutions (RMS) companies for help. RMS companies handle all aspects of returns management for you. They can generate shipping labels and return authorizations, which include information about why customers are returning the products, what they're returning and other pertinent information. They may also take care of the physical handling and disposition of those returns. Sometimes, these companies even have returns facilities, where employees scan, open, verify and assess the condition of the returned products.

Many RMS companies integrate their systems with yours, so your order management, credit processing, transportation, returns authorization generation and customer service systems are all connected. This way, you can track the status and condition of returned products, and items can be routed to the locations you designate.

Many RMS companies also allow your customers to return products to USPS offices or other carriers' offices, where they're shipped back to you. They also give your customers instant credit for returns. RMS companies usually charge an installation fee, starting at $10,000, and a transaction fee for each returned package--anywhere from 50 cents to $4, depending on the level of service offered.

Whether you decide to process returns yourself or hand the responsibility over to an outside firm, remember that satisfied customers are the only ones who will return to your Web site to shop in the future. And if your satisfied customer base--and your business--has been growing, can you really afford to alienate this pool of happy shoppers?

K) Offline Promotions

1. Always put your URL on letterhead, business cards and in e-mail signatures—wherever potential visitors are likely to see it.

2. If your employees wear uniforms, put your URL on them so every one of your customers sees a walking advertisement of your Web site.

3. Include your URL on all promotional items you give away—coffee mugs, T-shirts, key chains and so on. A daily reminder is a good way to get people to visit your site.

4. Be sure to include your Web address in all press releases you send out to members of the media. By having it at their fingertips, they may be more likely to include it in articles they write about your company.

5. Don't forget to put your Web address in your Yellow Pages ad. That's one place people see it every day.

6. Do you own any company vehicles? Be sure to put your URL on the side of any car or truck that's out there delivering your products.

7. In addition to listing your toll-free number, put your Web address on the bottom of every page of your catalog so customers have easy access to your online store.

Online Promotions
8. [Hone your search engine submission process](#) so you can get the best exposure possible.

9. If you're still itching for more exposure, you can explore [search engine marketing](#), wherein you pay to have a text ad appear when visitors search for certain keywords.

10. Launch a [sweepstakes](#) that offers anyone who registers on your site or subscribes to e-newsletters within a certain time frame the chance to win a free gift.

11. Send out a weekly [e-mail newsletter](#) to registered site members that offers tips and news related to your company or industry with links back to your site.

12. Offer [free content](#) to other sites. It's a win-win situation: The other site gets free articles to beef up their offerings and you get a link back to your site and the cachet of being an expert.

13. Send a well-planned, customer-focused [e-mail promotion](#) to a targeted list of potential visitors and offer a credit toward the purchase of anything from your site. Spend time on your e-mail's look and content: You want to offer value to customers and not have it appear to be spam.

14. Create your own [link exchange](#) by asking sites complementary to yours (but that don't compete) to put your link on their pages and you'll do likewise.

15. Hook up with [Web affiliates](#)—hundreds of sites that all link their traffic to yours—and get visitors from sites with related content.

16. Get active in online discussion groups and chats and always include your URL in your signature. (Don't do any hard selling, though. Most groups frown on such behavior and will think you're spamming the group.)

17. Any time someone orders a product from your site, include a catalog with their order to get them coming back for more.

18. Inspire your visitors to spread the word for you with [viral marketing techniques](#), from the aforementioned newsgroup participation to including an "e-mail this link" on every page of your site.

19. Not sure what your customers want? Try creating an [online survey](#) to get their crucial opinions on how well your site is selling to them.

20. When creating your own ads, make sure you understand who you're targeting, the goal of your campaign, and how to creatively use the ad confines to get viewers to click on your ad, not away from it.

21. Use other selling venues like online classified advertising or online auction sites to increase exposure to your site and products.

L)   It may seem like trying to find your Web site on a search engine or directory is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. However, you can influence your ranking within a search engine through a variety of ways, with the most basic aspect being proper set-up of the page being submitted--namely, the title of the page, metatag description, metatag keywords and body text.

Prior to editing the HTML of the page, do some prep work to plan the keywords the page should be associated with. On a worksheet, put together a list of 10 primary keywords that are strategic to your Web strategy. Order them by importance. In another row, list derivatives of the primary keywords.

For instance, one of your primary keywords might be cell phone. A derivative would be cellular phone or mobile phone. Keep on forming derivatives until you feel you have a complete list for that keyword.

With keywords established, take the top three or four, and build the title for the page. The title of the page is that portion of a Web site that appears at the top title bar of a browser. Keep the title to approximately 60 to 70 characters. Anything more, and the title may truncate when indexed by the search engines. The title should be descriptive and focused on key business aspects as reflected in your keywords.

For instance, the title for Entrepreneur.com is "Entrepreneur.com: Start, Grow, and Manage Your Small Business." Within the title for Entrepreneur.com, there are five different keywords represented: entrepreneur, start, grow, manage and small business. These keywords also form combinations: start your small business, grow your small business, and manage your small business. Finally, don't neglect your top-level domain (TLD). If it is strategic and key to your business, as a good TLD should be, then it, too, can be an important keyword reference in the title.

With the title formed, the description is next. The Web site's description will be placed within what is known as the metatag description, which is positioned in the "HEAD" area of the HTML. The site description should be explanatory, it should be no more than 30 words, and it should include as many of the top 10 keywords that will fit.

Using Entrepreneur.com as an example, here is its metatag description:

"Entrepreneur.com offers entrepreneurs the information, services and expert advice to ensure business success. Includes extensive information on starting a business, growing a business, business opportunities, franchises and homebased businesses."

Once again, you'll see the primary keywords from the title in the description as well as some new keywords such as "expert advice," "business opportunities," "franchises" and "homebased businesses." The description now serves to reinforce the title of the page.

Once the description has been finalized, start on the metatag keywords. Like the metatag description, the metatag keywords are placed in the "HEAD" of the HTML. Place all primary

keywords and derivatives in the keyword metatag. Separate each keyword using a comma. This will help establish important keyword phrases.

The final element to optimize on the page is the body text. The body text is very influential in positioning. If your Web site's navigation can be consistent with its primary keywords, it will reinforce those keywords when indexed by a search engine. Headlines, subheads, text links and normal text will also influence search engines. Try to keep these elements consistent with your primary keywords.

Finally, don't forget "alt text." This is the text area that can be associated with an image. Some sites use images for primary navigation aids. Make sure these images have alt text associated with them. Alt text is a parameter associated with the HTML "img src" command.

Once your page has been optimized, start submitting to the Web sites. If you formed your page properly, you should see significant improvements in your traffic.

M)   We all know that well-written copy is one of the most effective methods for getting people's attention and attracting them to your product or service, but the importance of the *shortest* copy is often overlooked. A lot of people don't even realize that things like their navigation menus, links or even their newsletter subscription offers are copy and require careful consideration.

Ironically, this kind of copy is one of the most valuable tools you have. Think about your…

- [Banners](#)
- Classified ads
- Newsletter subscription offers
- Navigation menus
- Links ("click here," "buy now")

This sort of copy is typically asking people to take some sort of action that is vital to your business: *visit* your web site, *request* more info, *subscribe* to your newsletter, *click* through, *buy* the product… which is why it requires much more attention than it tends to receive.

Of course it's more difficult to get your message across when you have limited space, but short copy is the glue that holds your [marketing campaign](#) together. And if every button on your menu, every ad, every link isn't as compelling and effective as it can be, you're not going to get the results you're hoping for, be it more sales, more subscriptions, more referrals, etc.

Here are four hard-and-fast rules of [copywriting](#) that must be followed for even the shortest of copy to guarantee you always make the most profitable use of the little space you have.

Rule #1: You must emphasize benefits, not features. I know, I know, you've heard this one before. But I so often see copy--short and long--that *neglects to mention* how the features of a product or service will benefit customers that I'm guessing a good number of you aren't sure what this really means. So let me clarify for you.

A *feature* is one of the components or functions of your product or service. For example, if your toothbrushes come packaged with glow-in-the-dark toothpaste, that's a feature--not a benefit.

A *benefit* is something your product or service will do for your buyer to somehow offer a solution to a problem. So if your toothbrushes that come with glow-in-the-dark toothpaste make stubborn kids thrilled to brush their teeth before they go to bed, then you've got yourself a benefit!

Are you following me? An online real estate agent advertising *"real-time mortgage calculations"* is advertising a feature of her site; however, if she writes, *"Avoid wasting time haggling at the bank with my real-time mortgage calculator,"* then she's advertising a benefit.

Emphasizing benefits is the number-one most overlooked rule of copywriting, and this lack of emphasis is one of the top reasons advertising falls flat. Short copy is no exception--and you don't need a lot of room to do it right.

Let's take a look at a short classified ad. If you posted an ad that read…

> *Real estate on the Internet.*
> *Plenty of listings.*
> *Shop at your convenience.*

…you probably wouldn't get the greatest response. The ad is brief and to the point, but it lacks clarity. First of all, what kind of property is being advertised? Are the listings for commercial buildings or family homes? What part of the world does the ad refer to? How many listings is "plenty"? How do we get to see these listings? And, most important, how does this service benefit me?

There's a vague reference to the benefit of "convenience" in this ad--but it's not really explained. Let's dress it up a bit:

Take a Personal Tour of 375+ of Seattle's Hottest, Most Affordable Single-Family Homes
Skip the hassles of house hunting when you search our *HUGE online database* of single-family homes:
375+ homes with pictures, video tours and detailed descriptions!
Search by price, location, number of bedrooms, number of bathrooms and more!
Get FREE local school reports, neighborhood information and mortgage calculations!
Click here now to begin searching our online database of Seattle's hottest, most affordable family homes--*without leaving your computer!*

This version expands on the benefit of convenience and details the different ways this convenience offers solutions to the house-hunter's problems. So the benefits we're clarifying for the reader are:

- House hunting is a hassle and now you can avoid it.
- Physically going to see 375 homes would be practically impossible, but you can easily do it online.
- You can search the database by very specific criteria to effortlessly find exactly what you want.
- Plus you'll get free reports that detail all the information you'll want to know about a new home and neighborhood that you wouldn't get even if you went there in person.

Also note that this ad targets a specific niche: single-family homebuyers in the Seattle area. Targeting your advertising is the only way to get your benefits in front of your best potential customers, as we'll discover in the next section.

Rule #2: You must write to a targeted audience. The fact is, your product or service is not going to appeal to everyone. And if you try to market it to everyone, you'll wind up with far fewer sales than if you choose a select group to direct your copy to. So once you've [defined your target market](#), you need to turn your attention toward making sure your copy addresses them *directly*.

For example, let's look at pay-per-click advertising. Let's say you bid 17 cents per click in Overture.com for the key phrase "single-family homes." Because you pay every time someone clicks through this link, whether they purchase from you or not, you want to make sure that your ad carefully targets your best potential customers.

Given that you're targeting single-family homebuyers in the Seattle area, you'd want to make sure your ad includes this vital piece of information. That way, you can be sure you won't waste money on people searching for single-family homes in San Diego! And if you bid 41 cents per click for the key phrase "Seattle homes," you'd want to make sure to write an ad that clearly states that your site features single-family homes so you don't waste your advertising dollars on condo-seekers or recreational property buyers.

By writing a separate ad for each of your keywords that carefully targets your market, you'll ensure that you attract the most buyers for the least cost. Of course, if you're writing copy for banner ads, your approach will need to be a bit different. Whether you're purchasing blocks of impressions (i.e. you pay a set dollar amount for your banner to be displayed 1,000... 10,000... etc. times on other Web sites) or participating in a banner exchange (i.e. you're trading banner impressions with a network of other site owners), you've paid for your advertising up front, so you'll want to do everything you can to attract viewers' attention and persuade them to click through to your site. And this means you'll want your ad copy to be a bit more general, to ensure it attracts the highest number of click-throughs.

The title of the above classified ad would make a great banner because you're targeting your best potential customers:

> **Take a Personal Tour of 375+ of Seattle's Hottest, Most Affordable Single-Family Homes! [Click here now...](#)**

But you might also try testing banners with more general copy that read something like this:

> **Search a HUGE online database of 375+ Seattle Dream Homes and skip the house-hunting headaches! [Click here now...](#)**

The first ad is going to attract the most qualified audience--those people looking for a single-family home in Seattle for a reasonable price. The second version, however, will attract a slightly broader audience. Still in Seattle and still looking for homes, this group is not necessarily looking for a single-family dwelling and they're not necessarily worried about price. They're just checking out homes in the Seattle area, and they're attracted by the size and convenience of the online database.

While the first ad may generate a higher visitor-to-sale conversion rate (the percentage of people clicking through who then sign up for the service) because it's more specific, the second ad will probably solicit more total click-throughs because it has a more general appeal. You'd have to test to see which version would pull the most sign-ups altogether.

Rule #3: You must include a call to action. Okay, that's easy enough. BUY NOW! There's a call to action. But hold on a minute. If it were that simple, everyone marketing online would be rich, and every online shopper would have to move into a bigger home to accommodate all that happily purchased stuff.

There are two very important things that you must include in your call to action:

- You must determine *exactly what action* you want people to take, and
- You must provide a reason *why* people should take that action.

Isn't *"Buy now"* exactly the action you want? Not necessarily. Think about what exactly it is that you're trying to do. Are you trying to generate leads? Do you want people to sign up for your free newsletter? Are you trying to attract a specific audience and hoping to convert as many of those people as possible into sales?

It's important to understand that *all* copy, if possible, should contain a call to action that clearly identifies what action is desired. I can't emphasize this enough. Think about the buttons on your site menu. Each one is a call to action. And they're all very important. If they're not as direct as possible, telling visitors *specifically* what to do, they'll be useless.

For example, if you have a button labeled "Sales," you're doing nothing but confusing your visitors, leaving them guessing whether you're referring to *product* sales (i.e., online ordering), products that are *on* sale (i.e., specials or discounts), or maybe the opportunity to *sell* your product (i.e., merchandising opportunities). But your visitors won't guess for long--why would they bother? They'll just leave your site.

If you change the button copy from "sales" to "order online," you're now asking visitors to take an action--to order your product. This clarifies the purpose of the button and tells the visitor what to do to get your product. Another example: Instead of writing "E-mail," you could ask visitors to "Contact Us." Again, you're asking visitors to take a specific action.

Of course, you won't always be able to include a call to action in every button; you won't always have the space. Your best bet in this case is to be as clear as possible. For example, it would be difficult to include a call to action in a button of your navigation menu that leads to your newsletter back issues. There would not be room to say, "Click here now to read our newsletter back issues." So in this case, you'd just want to make sure your copy is clear. Label the button "Newsletter Back Issues" instead of "More" or "Old Stuff."

Now let's think about your links. Supposing, *"Buy now"* is the action you want. You have to give people a reason to buy. Huge, garishly colored words on a screen won't do the trick; added benefits will. And in your links, you have a little more room to move. The call to action should remain the central focus of the link, but pack in as many benefits as possible around it. Something like this will win out every time over *"Buy now"*:

> "**Click here now** to claim your *'Golfer's Guide to the Green'* and instantly receive the downloadable video that features up-close-and-personal interviews with pro golfers who reveal their hottest golfing secrets, guaranteed to improve your game in 2 weeks or your money back!"

Rule #4: You must pay attention to layout. Making the most of your layout is especially important when you're writing short copy. The right blend of emphasis and information is the best way to attract viewers. Don't underestimate the effectiveness of bolding, italics, underlining, color and white space. But don't overdo it either.

For example, an offer to subscribe to your newsletter must be brief, compelling and effective. It will certainly not be the main feature of your Web page, so it must be attractive enough to grab the attention of a distracted reader. But it also needs to remain readable and informative, without a gross misuse of formatting tricks. If your ad has too much going on in it, it will look unattractive, unappealing and unprofessional--and the clutter will detract from the meaning of your message.

On the other hand, too little emphasis leaves you in danger of never catching anyone's eye. If your ad is totally boring, no one will ever even see it--and if they somehow do, they probably won't look at it long enough to find out what it's about.

So let's try to find a happy medium, emphasizing without crowding:

Subscribe to our FREE "Potato Farmer's" Newsletter
Subscribe today to the FREE "Potato Farmer's" newsletter, and on the first Tuesday of each month, you'll receive tips and strategies from industry leaders who'll reveal… Secrets for selling your crops for the highest profits! Tricks for cutting down the time you spend in the field! Cost-effective strategies for tripling your crop yield! Plus much, much more! Each issue contains tons of easy-to-implement techniques, guaranteed to *reduce your expenses* while *dramatically increasing your annual income!*
Click Here Now to Subscribe!

Catchy, effective and professional in appearance, this version draws your attention and doesn't distract you from the information it contains once you're there. The ad is clearly laid out and easy to read. The title is underlined and in blue, as is the link. (This is the standard way to handle links, and it lets the viewers know they can link to the sign-up page from either place.) Giving readers two chances to link through to your sign-up will always work better than one.

I've used only subtle formatting tricks to provide emphasis while keeping the ad visually appealing. The title of the newsletter is in quotation marks to give it additional emphasis. The main features of the newsletter--what you'll learn from the experts--are emphasized by the use of bullet points and a nice amount of white space. And the main benefits of the newsletter--reduce your expenses and dramatically increase your annual income--are italicized and strategically placed right before the call to action.

Because the call to action comes at the end of the ad, all that came before it supports it. And because it is the last bit of text and it is in blue, the viewer's eye is effectively drawn through the ad after being attracted by the title.

Of course, some of the formatting techniques discussed here are available only to people formatting their ads in HTML. Obviously, you have more options in HTML and can do pretty much whatever you like. But in a text format, you don't have the choice of adding color, bold, italics, etc. You do, however, have the ability to use characters, spacing, capitalization and indentation for effect.

So if we had to format our ad in text, it might look like this:

```
==================================================
"FREE Subscription to 'Potato Farmer's' Newsletter"
Subscribe today, and on the first Tuesday of each month,
you'll receive tips and strategies from INDUSTRY LEADERS
who'll reveal...
```

Secrets for selling your crops for the HIGHEST PROFITS!
Tricks for cutting down the time you spend in the field!
Cost-effective strategies for TRIPLING YOUR CROP YIELD!
Plus much, much more!
Each issue contains tons of easy-to-implement techniques, guaranteed to
REDUCE YOUR EXPENSES while dramatically INCREASING YOUR ANNUAL INCOME!
Visit http://www.PotatoFarmers.com to subscribe!
==

Because we don't have the option of hyper linking the text, effectively highlighting it in blue, I've moved the capitalized "FREE" to the beginning of the title to attract attention. I've also enclosed the headline in quotation marks for emphasis and put the newsletter title in single quotes (which should always be used inside double quotes). I've capitalized the benefits that were italicized in the HTML version and added a few more benefits to make the ad as eye-catching as possible. The general rule in text is to capitalize whatever you would have bolded or italicized in HTML, but be careful with your use of caps--they're difficult to read if used excessively.

Final Thoughts
So now that you know the secrets of fitting high-impact copy into small spaces, I'll let you in on another little secret . . . there's a lot more to learn! However, now that you have some of the basics under your belt, you should be able to start making dramatic improvements to your short copy . . . improvements that will attract a much bigger response and increased sales. If all your copy is written with the rules of benefits, audience, calls to action and layout in mind, you simply can't lose.

And remember: No amount of copy is so small that it can be overlooked. Every link, button, banner and classified ad is either making or breaking your marketing campaign as we speak.

N)   Ask yourself this: If your Web site were one of your salespeople, would you keep that employee working for you?

Almost every viable business today has a Web site that serves a number of purposes. Even a basic Web presence ensures a visitor that the company is for real and still in business. At larger companies, the marketing or Web department controls the messaging, content, look and feel. Support may have a section to offload customer service. Highly integrated businesses may even tie distribution and the supply chain to the site, allowing customers to check their orders.

It doesn't matter if you're the only "salesperson" or you have a dedicated sales team; brochures, product sheets and a shopping cart system aren't enough to build any online or offline business. You want your Web site to engage, enroll and compel customers. You want it to qualify prospects, present solutions and close sales. You want it to grab a visitor's attention, create some interest, build desire and get the visitor to take some action. You know--the stuff that salespeople do.

Getting Leads
Is your Web site getting good leads? Not all Web site visitors are created equal. Don't assume that just because they happen to be on your Web site, they're interested in buying your product or service. There tends to be four types of Web traffic:

1. **Browsers:** people who might have arrived on your site by mistake, curiosity or another form of general marketing. These visitors come with no intent.
2. **Suspects:** visitors who have already made a decision to fix a problem but still haven't decided on a solution. These groups are looking for something but aren't sure what they want.

3. **Prospects:** visitors who know both the problem and the solution and are making a decision regarding who is going to supply the solution. Where are they going to access the solution?
4. **Customers:** those who have already made the decision to buy from you and want to place an order.

Navigation

Does your Web site navigation qualify or disqualify your traffic? The navigation of your site must be able to identify and direct the leads that it receives into the appropriate part of your sales process. Does your site map the accepted AIDA (attention, interest, desire, action) sales process to each of the types of visitors?

Browsers and suspects need to see a strong USP (unique selling proposition), have their attention grabbed and interest created. Prospects want to know what's in it for them. You want to build desire by conveying real benefits. Customers want a fast and simple way to do business with you online.

Presentation

Does your Web site give good presentations to the right people? Like any good sales presentation, your site has to be tailored to its audience. The content that builds desire for one personality style may confuse or bore another. Your sales presentation, the content, should be specific to the various buying styles of your visitors.

Closing the Sale

So your site does the presentation, but does it ask for the order? There must be a point of action with a specific decision for the visitor to make. Is the purpose of the site to make sure that the visitor fills in a survey, follow-up or request-for-info form? Is it to make sure that they join the mailing list by subscribing to a newsletter? Perhaps you want the visitor to call in to book an appointment with a live sales rep, or even better, to complete the entire transaction online using your e-commerce system. Make sure your site asks for the order.

If you need help determining your Web site's weaknesses, there are many software programs available to help you track page hits, page views, length of visit and so on. Most important, you want to know where the customer was in the sales process when they came into the site and where they left.

Imagine the next sales meeting when it's time to look at the sales funnel and your sales forecast. You'll go through the numbers, looking at the number of current opportunities. How many new leads were added to the sales funnel? How many of those suspects are qualified? How many presentations were done to the qualified prospects? Finally, how much business is going to close this week, month or quarter?

Salespeople aren't paid for what they know. They're paid for what they sell. Should you include your Web site on your sales team, or should it be replaced?

E-Mail Marketing

O)   Let's say you're a business owner who usually only sends monthly newsletters, but you're thinking about e-mailing standalone product promotions to your subscribers. Do you think you'll seem too pushy? Is this really a good idea?

Yes, it's a good idea, and, no, it won't seem too pushy! Need proof? A recent Double-Click report found that 78 percent of people surveyed said they wanted to receive e-mail from their favorite

online merchants. And eMarketer found that 67 percent of U.S. consumers liked companies who, in their opinion, did a good job with permission e-mail marketing. So you don't need to worry about offending your customers with your promotion--provided you follow a few simple guidelines.

First things first: If you want your e-mail promotion to succeed, you need to make sure it looks professional, and this means proofreading your e-mail at least three times before sending it to your subscribers. Have a friend or co-worker check it out as well. If you send e-mail full of spelling mistakes, it will cost you sales and could permanently damage your credibility.

Next, send a test version of the message to yourself. You should sign up for a free e-mail account with Yahoo! and Hotmail, and include these accounts in your test mailing. If you have a friend or family member with an AOL account, send them a copy, too. The point here is to catch any formatting errors that might show up in the different e-mail programs. Believe me, you'll be surprised how often you find them!

And now for the most important part. Before you send out any promotion, ask yourself, "How relevant is this offer to my subscribers?" If your promotion doesn't answer this question immediately, you have some work to do.

Don't assume that your subscribers will automatically see why your e-mail promotion is relevant to them--you need to spell it out. Explain in detail how your product can help them and why now is the time to buy. Two of the most effective ways to highlight the relevance of your offer are to:

1. **Put a strong emphasis on benefits.** Let's say you sell skin-care products. You need to highlight the benefit to the customer (it gives them younger-looking skin) rather than the features (it contains 12 different moisturizers). Can you see how the benefit-centered statement is much easier to identify with than the feature-centered one?
2. **Make your offer exclusive.** Tailor your promotion so that it's exclusive to the people who receive it, then give them a strong reason to act immediately. You should let your subscribers know that this offer is only being made available to them and that it will only be available for a limited time.

Since this is your first e-mail promotion, you will definitely want to feature one of your most popular products. This is no time to try to unload old inventory or blow out last year's models. If you write an e-mail that gives people a good reason to buy one of your best-selling products, you can guarantee yourself a fantastic response!

8 Writing Tips for Your Promotional E-Mail

The proliferation of e-mail marketing can make it tough to stand out. Here are eight tips for writing e-mails that produce top results.

1. **Choose a great subject line.** Steer clear of misleading or mysterious subject lines. Nothing screams spam louder than "How are you?" An effective subject line includes a benefit and relates directly to your offer, such as "Save 60 percent on tape stock."
2. **Have a solid hook.** The first few sentences contain your hook and are the most critical part of your e-mail. The hook is the central message of your mailing. It should be clear and intriguing. Be sure it focuses on what they'll get, not on what you offer.
3. **Tell them what to do.** Your e-mail should have two or three paragraphs-no more. Total length should be less than 250 words. The body should support your hook using benefits, then close with a call to action. Tell readers what you want them to do and include hyperlinks such as "Click here to register."
4. **Use clear, direct language.** A well-written message uses the active voice and has short, concise sentences. This is crucial because as many as half of your recipients will read

just the first few sentences before deciding to continue. If writing isn't your strong suit, consider hiring an e-mail copywriter.

5. **Focus on your offer.** Your e-mail should have one subject and one subject only. Resist the temptation to make multiple offers, which may confuse your recipients and dilute your message.

6. **Don't drop the ball.** Some e-mail marketing messages fall short because they fail to include all the information customers need. Be sure to include vital data, such as pricing and deadlines. It's unreasonable to expect customers to visit your site to get the information they need to evaluate your e-mail offer.

7. **Include a P.S.** While a postscript isn't mandatory, it grabs attention. Often, recipients will read the subject line and the hook, scan key elements and go directly to the P.S. It should restate your hook and highlight your offer. After the P.S., give recipients a way to unsubscribe from your list. This is generally the last link at the bottom of the e-mail.

8. **Make it readable.** Even the best copy can't sell if your e-mail looks too dense. Keep paragraphs to three or four lines and double-spaced. Use bullets or stars to emphasize key points, but avoid text in all caps or multiple exclamation points. Set text width at 68 characters or less per line so it displays correctly in e-mail applications. Also, avoid breaking or wrapping URLs into two lines--it may cause technical problems. By eliminating these barriers, it'll be easy for customers to take advantage of your offer and dramatically boost your results.

P)   Here's the simple truth: If your site isn't collecting opt-in e-mail addresses from your visitors, you're losing money. I'm always blown away by the number of sites I visit that don't have a place for visitors to leave their e-mail addresses, but I think I've finally discovered the reason why every site doesn't take advantage of this essential marketing strategy: People are convinced that the process of adding this function to their site is complicated. It's not! Getting set up is quick and easy: You don't have to be a programmer to do it--and your opt-in list will quickly become your most valuable sales vehicle.

Of course, once you've started collecting opt-in e-mail addresses, the process of managing them can get scary pretty fast if you don't know what you're doing. So take it from me: The best way to approach the job of managing your lists is to learn from someone who's been doing it successfully for a while.

Here are a few tips and techniques that I use to keep my opt-in list under control...strategies that helped my company generate $2.4 million from e-mail marketing last year alone! These techniques can easily be applied to any business, so even if you're already collecting opt-in e-mail addresses, I think you'll find the following list management tips highly valuable.

Getting Started With Your Own Opt-in List

Don't have your own opt-in list yet? Don't worry. Getting started is much easier than you might think, and once it's up and running, the process of collecting opt-ins will be on autopilot for good.

First things first: You need to put a Web form on your site so you can collect e-mail addresses from your visitors. (A Web form simply provides a place for your visitors to enter their name, e-mail address and any other information you want to ask them for.) This form contains a script that will automatically send you an e-mail every time someone opts in to your list, telling you their name, e-mail address and any other information you asked them to provide.

You can easily set this up with any HTML editing program, like FrontPage or Dreamweaver, and if you're looking for a free resource that shows you how to do it, visit, www.htmlgoodies.com/tutors/fm.html. Of course, if you don't feel like doing it yourself, a Web designer could take care of it for you in less than an hour.

It's up to you to decide how you want to store, manage and use this information. Many people simply store their opt-in lists in a spreadsheet or text file, but there are also some great programs available to help you manage this information more easily.

Once you've started collecting opt-ins, there are a few things you'll need to know to effectively manage them and guarantee the highest possible response from any mailing you send. I've boiled them down to four simple strategies that will have you managing your lists like a pro in no time.

List Management Tip #1: Be diligent about managing your subscribes and unsubscribe.
One of the most important things you can do to keep your profits maximized--and your headaches minimized--is to stay on top of your subscribe and unsubscribe requests. For those of you who don't have an automated system for managing subscriptions to your newsletters and promotional mailings, this is especially important.

Requests to unsubscribe from your list should always be taken seriously. If someone asks to be removed from your list and you neglect to do so and continue to send them e-mail, you're spamming them, plain and simple. And nothing will get you in hot water faster than a few spam complaints. You'll find yourself wasting hours of time explaining yourself to the "spam police," and your ISP might even terminate your account!

Of course, it's just as important to ensure that the people who ask to be added to your list are added immediately since you never know which one of those subscription requests is going to represent your best customer. If you aren't ensuring that your mailing is being delivered to each and every person who signed up, you're literally throwing money away.

If your subscribe and unsubscribe requests aren't handled automatically, you should take care of this right before sending out a mailing. This ensures that your list is as current as possible; it also means you don't have to deal with this chore every single day. Just make it a part of your routine before you press, "Send" on any mailing.

List Management Tip #2: Keep your list clean.
Keeping your list clean means more than just removing unsubscribes. It means sifting through the messages that "bounce back" to you after a mailing and deciding which ones should be removed from your list altogether and which ones you might want to try mailing again.

Bounced messages, also referred to as "undeliverable" messages, are those messages that, for whatever reason, were not successfully received by the intended recipient. Before we go any further, you should know that there are two main categories that bounced messages can fall into:

- **Fatal Bounces:** These represent messages that can never be delivered. Fatal bounces are usually caused by the user typing in an incorrect e-mail address when opting in to your list or the subscriber no longer using the e-mail address they originally opted-in with.
- **Nonfatal Bounces:** These are messages that could not be delivered at the time the server tried to deliver them but may be deliverable at some time in the future. These types of bounces are usually caused by the recipient's mailbox being full or their mail server being too busy at the time your message was sent.

When reviewing your bounced messages, you'll want to separate them into these two categories. You'll have to go into each returned message and take a look at the reason why it bounced. These messages can be a little tough to decipher, but the two most common reasons for fatal errors are "Unknown User" and "Domain Not Found."

When you come across these error messages, the first thing you'll want to do is take a quick look at the e-mail address that the message was being sent to. You'll often find that people will type an "n" instead of an "m" in the ".com" part of their e-mail address. You can easily correct this by changing the ".con" to ".com."

If there's no obvious problem with the subscriber's e-mail address, then this usually means they entered it incorrectly when they opted-in to your list or that it's no longer in use. Unfortunately, there's nothing that you can do about these type of errors, except delete those subscribers from your list. (Just in case you're thinking "Why go through the trouble of removing these addresses from my list if they can't be delivered anyway," think again! If you continue to send e-mail to an address that's invalid, you can get into real trouble. This is one of the common methods used to identify spammers, and if you're reported as someone who repeatedly sends messages to "dead" e-mail addresses, you can get into trouble with your ISP.)

For nonfatal errors--the most common are "Mailbox Is Full" or "Server Too Busy"--you'll want to try mailing your promotion to these people again. I suggest waiting a few days and then trying to resend your message to all the addresses that returned nonfatal errors in your initial mail out. You'll be surprised by how many get delivered on the second try.

List Management Tip #3: Create exclude lists.
Are you subscribed to your competitors' mailing lists? You should be! A big part of keeping tabs on your competitors is monitoring what products or services they're actively promoting and how much they are selling them for. If your competitors are smart, I can just about guarantee that they're subscribed to your mailing list, too. So in order to stay one step ahead of your competitors, you might want to think about excluding them from certain mail outs. Let's suppose you're planning a big promotion that's going to offer a product at a price 30 percent below what your competition is offering it for. Wouldn't you want to keep that information out of your competitors' hands as long as possible?

Just about the only step you can take to stay ahead of your competition in this respect is to go through your opt-in list and exclude addresses that you know belong to your competition. If your competitor runs a site called joes-widget-world.com, then you can be sure that the e-mail address susan@joes-widget-world.com belongs to someone who's keeping tabs on you.

Simply exclude that e-mail address from your promotion, and your competitors won't know what hit them . . . until well after you've dominated the market!

List Management Tip #4: Store and manage your subscriber data correctly.
As your list grows, it will become more important to ensure that you're storing your subscriber data in a format that's convenient and easy to work with. The biggest problem that people run into when they start trying to manage and optimize their opt-in lists is that they quickly find themselves with dozens of small lists instead of one big one. List "A" might contain people who've purchased your product in the past three months, List "D" might contain subscribers who've downloaded your free e-book but have never bought your product, List "W" might contain people who've bought five or more of your products, and so on.

While this means that you're able to easily target different segments of your customer and subscriber base, it also means you could spend hours preparing your various lists for each promotion you send. Those of you who are doing this already know how frustrating and time-consuming these kinds of tasks can be. And once you have your lists ready, importing them into whatever e-mail application you're using can be even more maddening!

Luckily, there are some pretty powerful products out there designed to help e-mail marketers develop, manage and segment their lists easily, from one user-friendly interface. The right

software can literally save you hundreds of hours of frustration. Keep your eyes open, because we're going to be talking about some of these products in future features.

Once you get your lists under control, you'll be amazed at how much extra time you'll suddenly have on your hands. And if you're like me, you'll want to spend it working on other, more profitable aspects of your business.

Q)   Just because you have your sign-up box ready to go and are prepared to handle your opt-in lists, it doesn't mean people will automatically provide you with their e-mail addresses. You've got to give them something in order to get something.

People value their privacy--and their information--so you have to offer them something compelling in return: an e-newsletter aimed at their interests, for instance, or a free e-book on a subject they've told you they're interested in. However, let's assume you're already offering something valuable in exchange for their e-mail addresses. If you're still not getting many sign-ups, it's likely your pitch that needs polishing.

To convert more of your visitors to subscribers, you'll need to write a really compelling subscription offer. I'm still astounded when I see a Web site with an opt-in box that says "Subscribe to Our Free Newsletter." What am I subscribing to? Why should I subscribe to it? How often will I get it? Who is it coming from?

Without answers to at least a few of these questions, there's no way people are going to sign up. So how do you persuade them that your newsletter is worth signing up for? You have to promote it!

Let's say your Web site sells football memorabilia. Here's an example of some copy that's guaranteed to get a great opt-in response:

The End Zone is a weekly NFL newsletter that's absolutely jam-packed with all the week's hottest news, stats and stories. It also features interviews with your favorite players, the inside scoop on next week's games, plus a chance to win an autographed jersey from the team of your choice. Click here to subscribe now!

That's a little more compelling than "Subscribe Now," isn't it? And the best part is that it takes just minutes to pump up the copy!

Here are some more sure-fire ways to boost your opt-in rate:

1. **Show them your privacy policy.** Include a small link to it when you ask visitors for information. This lets people know that you're committed to protecting their privacy and makes them feel safe leaving their e-mail address with you. It's a small thing, but every little bit helps.
2. **Sell the benefits, not the features.** If you said "Download our FREE e-book, written by a state-certified housing inspector," you'd be advertising a feature. You'd be telling your visitors a fact about your free newsletter. Here's how it reads if we decide to emphasize benefits instead: "Certified housing inspector John Smith reveals the 10 things you must look for when buying a home--to avoid costly repairs down the road. Click here to read this FREE e-book!"

   That's a pretty dramatic difference, isn't it? You've hooked your visitors by letting them know how they'll benefit by signing up for your offer. In this case, you've promised to help them avoid costly home repairs.

3. **Give your offer prime real estate.** That's the only way you'll draw in subscribers. So what's the best location? If your home page contains a long sales letter, you'll want to put the opt-in box somewhere around the second page. You should have grabbed your visitors' attention by then and shown them that your site has some valuable information.

If your home page doesn't feature a long sales letter, you'll want to place your opt-in box "above the fold," in the first section of your Web site that's visible to a visitor without scrolling. People's eyes are generally drawn to the top left-hand part of a page first, so the top or left is a good place to put your opt-in box.

Here's a powerful third option that doubled our daily newsletter subscriptions: Set up a pop-up window that prompts visitors to subscribe to your newsletter right when they enter your Web site.

Remember, this is not a question of where your opt-in form looks best. It's all about where it works best, so I would encourage you to test a few different locations. Whichever pulls the most opt-ins is the best place for your box.

6 More Opt-In Boosting Methods

Other ways to promote a newsletter or opt-in list include:

- **Offering existing customers a subscription.** Have you offered your existing customers a subscription to your newsletter? If you haven't, you should e-mail them an offer like this as soon as possible. This is an easy way to get a flood of new subscriptions.

  And be sure to add a subscription offer to your "thank you for ordering" page or e-mail. If someone's interested enough in your product or service to purchase it, you can bet they'll want to subscribe to your newsletter. Don't miss this opportunity to maintain contact with existing customers.

  If you've offered a free subscription to your customers but received a poor response, consider making things a little more interesting by offering them a "special gift" like a free article or eBook when they subscribe. This extra incentive should dramatically boost the number of new subscriptions you receive.

- **Promote your newsletter in your e-mail signatures.** An electronic signature--also referred to as a "sig file"--is a three- to six-line footer you can attach to the bottom of your e-mail messages and public forum postings. And it's a prime spot to advertise your newsletter.

  Unlike a lot of other blatant advertisements, a sig file is universally accepted, so take advantage of this perfect opportunity to plug your newsletter. Anyone who receives an e-mail from you will also receive your invitation to subscribe to your newsletter. Chances are, if you're e-mailing them, they already have a direct interest in your industry or niche, so take advantage of this and offer them a free subscription right at the bottom of any e-mail you send.

- **Ad swap with other newsletters and e-zines.** A great trick for increasing your subscriber base involves contacting other newsletters that relate to your target market and offering to swap ads with them. Tell the newsletter owners you'll promote their newsletter to your subscriber base if they'll return the favor. This is a great way for both of you to increase your readership. Subscribers will appreciate the recommendation of another source of quality information, and as long as the sites you swap with are complementary and not competitive, it's not going to hurt your business at all.

- **Promote your newsletter in newsgroups, discussion lists and forum postings.** Another good place to promote your newsletter and locate targeted potential subscribers is in newsgroups, discussion lists and forums that relate directly to your industry or niche. Simply post a brief description of your newsletter and a link to your subscription page.
- **Renting opt-in e-mail lists.** Renting e-mail addresses from third-party list providers is a route that some new newsletter owners choose because you're given quick access to a list of hundreds, if not thousands, of people who have "opted" to receive e-mail on topics that interest them. You can usually expect to be charged 5 to 20 cents per deliverable message, and you should expect any e-mail addresses that are "bad" or that "bounce" to be replaced by addresses that are current.

If you decide to use a service like this, it's absolutely critical that you find out how the e-mail addresses were obtained. You want e-mail addresses that have been collected ethically and responsibly, and this means you want the e-mail addresses of people who are directly interested in your product, industry or field of expertise, and have given their permission and "opted-in" to the list.

Important note: If you buy lists of e-mail addresses that have been "harvested" from newsgroups, classified ad sites, online services and other similar sources, you'll be accused of spamming! These people have not given you permission to contact them, and you can get into a lot of trouble this way. Again, I can't overstate the importance of making sure the e-mail addresses you rent have been collected ethically and responsibly! A few reputable third-party list providers who offer targeted opt-in e-mail lists are: Postmaster Direct, YesMail, E-Target, Targ-it, Focalex and TargitMail.

Ultimately, your goal should be to develop a relationship with your subscribers through quality articles in your newsletter before you even consider trying to sell them anything. Give them quality information that they'll benefit from to establish your credibility and develop a rapport with them.

Remember that the true value lies in the relationship that you develop with the person who owns the e-mail address--not in the e-mail address itself. It will be the relationship you develop with your subscribers that will result in big sales both now and in the future--an important point to keep in mind no matter how many new subscribers you attract.

R) If you use e-mail to promote your business, product or service, it's crucial that you clearly understand the difference between opt-in e-mail and spam (also known as "unsolicited commercial e-mail").

Spam is a huge problem: Forrester Research estimates that e-mail users get about 110 unwanted messages weekly. Brightmail has released reports that state 41 percent of all e-mail is spam, up from only 8 percent in 2001. And because many people access their e-mail primarily at work, Ferris Research estimates that spam will cost U.S. businesses $10 billion this year alone!

As a result, Internet service providers (ISPs) have started working closely with anti-spam organizations to filter all incoming e-mail for spam by actually blocking messages that contain particular words or phrases (like "for free," "MLM" or "XXX") and shutting out all e-mail from the domains and IP addresses of known spammers. Basically, this means if you're labeled a spammer--even if you've made an honest mistake--the majority of your e-mail and newsletters may be "filtered" and never reach your subscribers. If your e-mail is blocked by ISPs, it can take weeks--even months--to resolve the issue. In some cases, if you really mess up, you may never be able to send e-mail from your domain or IP address ever again.

So what is opt-in e-mail marketing anyway? Simply put, opt-in e-mail is e-mail sent to people who have given you permission to contact them via e-mail on a particular subject. It builds on existing relationships with customers, newsletter subscribers, affiliates and sales leads. This is why opt-in e-mail is sometimes referred to as "permission-based" e-mail marketing, and it's the most critical element to take into consideration when launching an e-mail campaign.

You see, opt-in e-mail marketing allows you to develop a relationship with your customers and establish credibility in your industry. Studies have shown that you'll need to contact most people between four and seven times to close a sale--and the low cost of e-mail allows you to effectively establish this regular contact with your clients.

If you regularly provide your customers with valuable information (like newsletters or updates) by e-mail, they'll start to recognize your name in their inboxes. So when you have promotional offers for them, they'll be open and receptive.

How is opt-in e-mail different from spam? Spam is basically unwanted e-mail that's been sent by a company or person with whom the recipient has had no prior contact. Spammers don't care about establishing relationships. They send out millions of offensive e-mails hoping to make a few one-time sales. If you've been on the Internet for any length of time, you know just how annoying (and offensive) it can be.

How can you be sure you're not spamming? Consider the following before sending any message to your e-mail list:

- If your message is being sent to people you have no relationship with, it's spam.
- If your offer is fraudulent, or promotes fraudulent activities, it's spam.
- If you're using deceptive subject lines to trick people into opening your message, it's spam.
- If you're using a phony or non-existent "From" e-mail address or name, it's spam.
- If you are forging the headers on your message, so that it looks like it came from somewhere or someone else, it's spam.
- If you do not include an easy way for recipients to unsubscribe from your list, it's spam.

Your potential customers know the difference between spam and legitimate opt-in e-mail. In fact, according to IMT Strategies, more than 80 percent of people feel negatively towards spam, whereas 78 percent of the people surveyed in a recent Double-Click report said they wanted to receive e-mail from their favorite online merchants.

Why do you really need to know the difference between spam and opt-in e-mail? If you're accused of spamming, or if your messages get caught in spam filters, you'll suffer lost revenue, inaccurate campaign measurement and a damaged reputation. You could have your e-mail account shut down or blocked, and you could even lose your Web site.

Have you ever heard of a "blacklist," or a "black hole list"? These are the lists of known or suspected spammers maintained by spam-fighting organizations--and you'll want to keep your name off of them at all costs! Most of these lists are created based on reports from recipients of spam, and since they operate on a "guilty until proven innocent" principle, you can find yourself having to do some very serious (and very public) defense of your mailing practices to clear your name.

Major ISPs and online services worldwide use the blacklists of the anti-spam groups to filter spam before it ever reaches their customers. So if your name appears on one of these lists, you can be

sure a high percentage of your messages will never reach your subscribers--they'll be filtered by the ISPs!

If you think all this sounds a bit extreme, just think about the situation from an ISP's point of view. All those spam messages take up a ton of bandwidth, and this costs the ISPs money. Plus, as the ISPs' customers get more and more annoyed with spam, they start to complain about the problem. And the ISPs know that if they can't keep their customers happy, those customers will leave.

That's why many of the larger online services are also implementing their own anti-spam measures. The latest releases of MSN (Hotmail), Yahoo! and AOL all include some form of spam filtering or reporting. And these features are getting used a lot! In early March, AOL reported that they'd blocked more than 1 billion spam messages in one day. And AOL users use the "report spam" feature up to 5.5 million times every single day!

Various levels of government are also starting to get involved in the fight against spam. Many states now have anti-spam laws, and it's quite possible there will be a federal law in place soon. While it's still hard for individual e-mail users to use the laws to do much about spam, large online service providers have successfully sued spammers who were seen as highjacking their bandwidth resources.

The silly thing about all this controversy is that spam is quite simply not an effective marketing tool. People aren't open to accepting offers from companies they have no relationship with. And even if a spammer does make a few sales after sending out several million e-mails, it's just not a viable long-term business strategy.

Think about it. If you send out 20 million e-mails and make 10 sales, you've probably at least mildly annoyed well over 19 million people. Does that sound like good business sense to you? Are people who are annoyed with you the first time you spam them likely to respond any better when you try to e-mail them again? No. Spam is just not a good way to establish a decent relationship with your customers.

Plus, spammers make life harder for legitimate opt-in e-mail marketers, since spam filters are getting more rigid, and e-mail users are starting to delete more messages than they actually read. More and more people are using spam filters to divert spam away from their inboxes, which results in many legitimate e-mail messages being caught in spam filters. Here are the things you must do to avoid being accused of spamming:

1. **Keep records of how and when people are added to your opt-in list.** Of course, keeping good records is always good business practice, but in the case of opt-in lists, it's critical. If you're ever accused of spamming, your battle to clear your name will be much easier if you have good records to back yourself up.
2. **Track requests to opt out, and remove people who opt out of your list immediately.** Again, records are a good way to keep yourself safe. And remove requests always need to be taken seriously. If you can't implement remove requests every day, make sure you always deal with them before sending a mailing.
3. **Post your privacy policy on your Web site and abide by it.** This is just good business sense, and it will also increase your opt-in rate, since people will feel more comfortable sharing information they are confident won't be abused.
4. **Investigate third-party service providers before signing any contracts for e-mail services.** Remember that in the world of e-mail promotions, you're judged by the company you keep. If you're dealing with less-than-honest service providers, you could be the one who ends up in hot water.

5. **Be careful with rental lists.** Always ask to see the form that's used to collect e-mail addresses for a rental list, so you can be sure that people on the lists have given permission to be contacted and that they gave the list broker permission to sell or rent their address.
6. **Use a real return e-mail address that has enough storage space to receive your bounce-backs and opt-outs.** If you're using a free e-mail service, make sure you have plenty of room in your account before you do a mailing.
7. **Provide easy instructions on how to unsubscribe from your list.** If you don't do this, your message will be flagged as spam, plain and simple. Even if you instruct people to unsubscribe by clicking on a link or sending e-mail to a specific address, honor any remove requests that are sent to your return e-mail address as well.
8. **No matter how tempting it may be, do not reply to any angry messages you get from people accusing you of sending them spam.** Simply remove them promptly from your list, and be glad they're gone.

The easiest way to know for sure that you're not spamming is to ask yourself whether the people you'll be mailing to have given you permission to contact them. Your newsletter subscribers and customers fit this description. E-mail addresses you've purchased on a CD for $40 do not.

The second test is to make sure your message is being sent to a targeted list of people. If you sell computer software, your existing customers and subscribers will be open to offers relating to computers, software and maybe even computer accessories. But even though they know you, they will not be happy if you send them offers for discount travel or adult Web sites. They won't understand why you're sending them offers that have nothing to do with the relationship you've established with them, and your messages will be considered spam!

Don't forget to include an easy way for customers to opt out of your e-mail list. You'll probably have a few people ask to be removed from your list after each mailing, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. After all, if people have no interest in hearing from you, should you be wasting your resources on them?