



Essential E-Business Partners

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Essential E-Business Partners

There are a number of components needed to successfully operate an e-business. There are a number of different organizations that affect your business. From hardware to software to Internet access to logistics, many of the functions necessary for success can be outsourced to save you money. Not only will you have expectations from your partners, your partners will certainly have certain expectations of you.

Your Internet Service Provider

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Price, reliability, flexibility and service are all important elements that need to be considered before you choose an ISP. The cost will depend on the amount of access you need and what you plan to use the account for. Define your needs and decide how you will use your site. Will your site take up a lot of room on the server (disk usage)? Does it get a lot of traffic (bandwidth)? What sorts of extras will you need — additional e-mail addresses, multiple domains, secure transaction capabilities, RealAudio, etc.?

Does the ISP have start-up charges and how many of the features you need are covered in those? What is the basic rate for monthly hosting of your site? Are you going to have to pay for extra features? Are they flexible enough to meet your specific needs?

Reliability is critical, so the lowest cost provider is not necessarily the one to go with. The problems involved with any sort of service failure can cause irreversible damage to your business and its reputation. How often does the ISP do backups? Does your ISP guarantee how much time your site will be up?

How good is your ISP's customer service? Call their customer service/tech support before any problems arise to assess how helpful they are, and how long you are kept on hold. Send them an e-mail to find out their response time.

Your Web Design Firm

The first step toward finding the right web consultant is to ask yourself a simple question: Why do you want to be on the Web? Completing a web business plan before attempting to go online an essential step in determining the structure and content required for your site.

When choosing a web design firm you must weigh the cost against the output. Do you want to put your firm's reputation in the hands of a novice to simply save a few dollars? Weigh skill level against pricing to decide if you will use an established firm, a start-up, or learn to do it yourself. By using the latest industry standard technologies, you have increased flexibility to switch hosts/web developers if desired or to make future web site additions.

Determine staff strengths and weaknesses to identify what outside skills should be sought. Do you need someone to take over the whole project, or do you just need a few contractors to fill in the holes? Do you have the staff needed to maintain the site?

How can you make sure your site design experience will not be more trouble than it is worth? Prepare a detailed request for proposal (RFP), check references, and have the right people on staff to manage the consultant's work. Make sure you test the site exhaustively before offering access to any of your customers.

Your Logistics Firm

The key to success in e-business is not a technology focus, it is a customer focus. Today, many Internet enterprises outsource fulfillment and customer service operations as a way to increase efficiency and lower costs. Outsourcing your company's logistical work will allow you to focus on your core competencies.

Since many small and medium-sized businesses do not have sufficient volume to build a cost-effective infrastructure, partnering with a logistics firm that offers cost-effective, accurate, and timely fulfillment can dramatically improve customer service. This will ensure that you meet or surpass your customers' service expectations.

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If you're considering outsourcing your order fulfillment systems, look for the following:

- A company that is dedicated to protecting your name and reputation: Will they keep up their end of the bargain?
- A partner that understands e-commerce market opportunities and provides a complete back-end solution: Do they offer everything you need?
- A management team with extensive experience: How long have they been in the business?
- The ability to move your products effectively and efficiently: The company's track record with other companies is a good place to look for information on their operating practices.

Your Computer Hardware Company

When choosing a computer company to provide your organization with hardware, the same set of criteria as above should be reviewed. Cost is always an important aspect when choosing which company will provide you with equipment. Who can provide you with the best price for the equipment you need? On one hand, you would like to save money, but not without ensuring that the equipment is of high quality. You don't want to spend all that money setting up your e-commerce infrastructure, only to find that some of the computers or servers do not function properly.

Will the company you are doing business with be involved with the installation of the hardware, or will they simply play the role of vendor? This relationship needs to be clarified from the outset. You don't want to end up purchasing equipment and have no one to get it up and running. As well, what kind of extra costs will be involved with the installation? What kind of service will the hardware company provide after the system has been successfully installed?

Contact Us

The Alberta E-Future Centre, a service initiative of The Business Link, is your first stop for e-business information in Alberta. We offer free, impartial, and easy-to-understand e-business advice and information for small and medium-sized businesses. Our goal is to help entrepreneurs make more informed decisions as they adapt to technological change. If you have any questions, we are only a visit, click or a call away!

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