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Integrating E-Business into Your Small Business
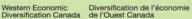
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E-Business is an Important Part of Your Business

E-business can be defined as the use of the Internet to conduct business. For the most part, e-business is about your company's website and how you use the site (and your e-mail) to help operate and grow your business. In today's marketplace e-business is a very important tool that can help you increase sales and reduce costs.

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Why Does E-Business Matter?

E-business is very important because the number of your customers that are online and looking for information about products and services is always increasing. Consumers expect to be able to communicate with your company through your website and via e-mail. They expect your company to deliver the information they need immediately. According to Statistics Canada, in 2003 about 64 percent of Canadian households used the Internet regularly. The number of businesses using the Internet is even higher. The important point to note here is that the majority of Canadians are now Internet users, and this percent will only increase with national broadband initiatives. If you haven't embraced the Internet yet, you are among a dwindling minority.

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Key E-Business Issues to Consider

You should always think about your goals and objectives and plan how e-business is going to work for your business. Hire a professional to help you determine your needs. It is also important to consider the return on investment. Any e-business initiative should pay for itself, either by increasing your sales or reducing the costs of operating your business. When integrating e-business into your small business there are several key issues to consider, including:

- **Proper planning** – Hire a professional to help you
- **Return on investment** – The e-business initiative should pay for itself
- **Sales and marketing** – How does e-business fit with your sales cycle?
- **Customer relationship management** – Provide a superior customer experience
- **Business productivity** – Increased efficiency translates to profit

- **Managing and updating your website** – Stay connected with your audience.

How E-Business Works with Your Sales and Marketing

Sales and marketing is all about communicating with your target audience, and e-business is a great communications tool. E-business can help you reach your target market and convince customers to purchase a product or service. E-business can also help you manage your sales and marketing process more efficiently which, in turn, increases your profit margin.

Sell More Stuff

E-business isn't always about your customers buying directly online with a credit card. Many business models just don't fit well with direct online sales. It all depends on how your customers buy from your company. Your website might work best as an information resource that tells visitors why your company is great and why your products offer value. Or your website might be a product catalog with deep information that helps people begin to configure their orders. After the sale, your website can act as a support tool, answering common questions your customers have about their new products, or it can provide technical support information.

Reach More Customers

E-business can help you get a lot more out of your marketing budget. A website (and e-mail communication) can reach new markets at much lower costs than traditional marketing. For example, your website can offer an online product catalog, allowing you to spend less money on printing paper catalogs. Instead you might spend that money on a teaser brochure that you can send to a wider target audience or on a targeted e-mail marketing campaign. These marketing tools can direct people to the full online catalog. The result is that you reach far more people for the same amount of money.

Keep It Professional

Now that you'll be reaching so many more possible customers with your website, it's important to have a good website that mirrors the quality and reputation of your brick-and-mortar company. Hire a professional consultant to help you sort out the

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issues of how your e-business strategy will work best with your business. A poor website will spread a negative impression of your company, and you certainly want to avoid that.

Build Stronger Relationships with Your Customers

E-business can help you improve your customer relationships which, in turn, should lead to increased sales and good word-of-mouth about your business. Customers expect your business to have a good website that delivers useful information, and they expect to be able to communicate with you quickly and easily through e-mail. Don't disappoint them.

Know Your Customers

Every business should have a good CRM (Customer Relationship Management) software package (whether it's on the office computer or web-based). This software allows you to build a database of all your customers, and enter all sorts of details about each customer. Good CRM software will help you see purchasing trends, track customer requests or complaints, and much more.

Communicate with Customers Regularly

Through your website and e-mail communications, you can stay in contact with your customers at a very low cost. As you interact with customers you should build up a permission-based mailing list, so that you can start sending out a regular e-mail newsletter. It's important to get permission from your customers before putting them on the e-mail list. Customers appreciate useful information, but they will have a very poor impression of your company if you spam them with useless information they didn't request.

What Kind of Information Should You Send to Customers?

The simple answer is this – information that is useful and meaningful to your customers. Here are a few examples of information you might send to customers:

- New product announcements and details of new product features
- Product information tailored to a customer's specific request and preferences

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- Relevant news items about your company
- Price changes or special offers such as website-only deals
- General industry news and helpful tips

Run Your Business More Efficiently

Using e-business properly can help you work more efficiently and increase business productivity. Working smarter usually translates directly to your bottom-line profit. While e-business usually refers to your website and e-mail, it also means using computer technology to make your business operation more efficient.

You Can Always Work Smarter

Here are just a few examples of how companies use e-business to work more efficiently:

E-business can help you work more efficiently and increase business productivity. Working smarter usually translates directly to your bottom-line profit.

- **Website Statistics**
  Website statistics allow you to monitor how many people are visiting your site, where they come from, what information in the site is the most popular, and much more. Monitoring site traffic can help you identify opportunities. For example, you might notice an increase in visitors from another country. This may mean you have an export market opportunity.

- **E-mail Communication**
  E-mail is fast and affordable, allowing you to communicate easily with your customers, your own staff, your suppliers, and anyone else involved in your business. E-mail is a great way to keep everyone on the same page and reduce communication problems. Another benefit of e-mail is that can be a searchable database of all your business communications.

- **Employee Training**
  You can use the Internet to deliver training courses at a much lower cost than in a traditional classroom situation. Your staff can upgrade skills, learn about new product support issues, and much more. Online learning is fast, effective, and affordable.

- **Sourcing Business Needs**

  You can use the Internet to source almost anything your business needs, from finding new suppliers, to searching for new employees, or even finding a business partner in a new market. The Internet can save you a lot of time.

Managing and Updating Your Website

Updating your website with timely and useful information is a key strategy for success. Your customers expect you to keep your site current, with new pricing or product information, news articles, company information, and more.

Pay Your Developer to Update Your Website

Unless your business is building and managing websites, you should consider outsourcing the job of updating your site to a professional. There is a huge time and opportunity cost in doing it yourself. Having someone inside your business update your website costs you not only the money you pay that person for that amount of time, but it also costs you the time that person could have spent working on your business. A good website will pay for itself many times over, including the cost of updating, so it's a poor use of time and resources to try a do-it-yourself solution. There are some content management solutions that can make it easier and more cost effective to update your own website.

Make a Plan and Stick to a Schedule for Updates

Your customers expect you to keep your site current.

While you may not be updating your own website, you do need to be actively involved in providing your technical partner with the content to add to your site. Talk to your web developer about how you will deliver information (such as in a Word document) and set up a schedule for regular updates (once per week, once per month, quarterly). Your website developer should be able to guide you.

Appoint an Editor

You should decide who in your business is going to be responsible for organizing the content for updating the site. This person is essentially an editor, and it is his or her job to gather up content for updates and make sure it gets to the website developer on time and in the correct format. It's still important to keep an eye on

the opportunity cost. Make sure people in your business aren't spending too much time creating content for the website. Look for efficient ways to source content for your website and identify which content is most valuable to your customers. Often you can get permission to add industry newsletter or magazine articles to your site, or even content from other websites.

Additional Resources

There are lots of resources and information available for anyone who wants to explore the subject of integrating e-business into your small business. Your local Business Service Centre is a great place to start. Below are some other good resources:

Websites

- Saskatchewan E-Future Centre
  www.e-future.ca/saskatchewan
- *business infosource*
  http://www.cbsc.org/sask
- Useit.com
  www.useit.com
- E-Business News from Forbes
  www.forbes.com/ebusiness
- Clickz.com Internet trends and stats
  www.clickz.com/stats

Books

- e-Business 2.0: Roadmap for Success, by Marcia Robinson
- The Complete E-Commerce Book, by Janice Reynolds
- Internet Marketing for Dummies, by Frank Catalano

Contact Us

The Saskatchewan E-Future Centre, a service initiative of *business infosource*, is your first stop for e-business information in Saskatchewan. 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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