

# Online Business Basics

A Practical Primer for 'Newbies'



2<sup>nd</sup> Revision

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Online Business Basics  
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**This free eBook contains short excerpts from the full version of  
the Online Business Basics guide for beginners.**

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## Introduction

Welcome to the exciting world of eBusiness! My name is Angela, and I'm the author of this manual. Here you'll find the very same basic methods I've personally used to build a profitable business from scratch using primarily free and low-cost marketing techniques.

Many "gurus" claim it's easy to make money online if you follow their "proven system". However, I discovered that much of the advice provided on Internet marketing only works *if* you have your own opt-in list of responsive subscribers, *if* you have a high-traffic website, or *if* you have the right contacts. Not exactly helpful to someone just starting out!

Making money online is not as easy as you may have been led to believe. It's certainly *possible*... and not just for people with business degrees, but for people from all walks of life. But remember:

**You have to be able to make \$1 first, before you can make \$10, \$100, \$1000, and more.**

That's all there is to it. Everyone has to start somewhere. You won't make \$10000 overnight... and you certainly won't do so using an "automated system" with only 5 minutes or work a day. I was able to quit my corporate job after 15 months online – that's 15 months of working typically 5-7 days or 10-30 hours a week (in between sleeping, my corporate job, and general "life")!

The Online Business Basics manual offers real information that any beginner can learn to use. There are plenty of Internet business and marketing books available that claim to cater to 'newbies', but I can assure you that this one's different.

- No hype! I won't tell you with claims that making money online is easy... nor will you find information that's useful only to people, for example, who already have their own lists. Here, you'll find out how to build *your own* list.
- This collection of marketing tips has been specifically selected for beginners operating on limited budgets. Not every method works equally well for every business – so you can try and test them on your own, then concentrate on the methods that work best for *you*.

For instance, some businesses love to use the pay-per-click search engines because this particular technique works wonders for them. That's great! On the other hand, I find that my conversion rate is higher when I write articles – and since I write my own content for

my newsletters, distributing articles for reprint is a relatively simple, fast, and effective marketing technique for me.

- You won't be told what to do and then left hanging. Here you'll also find how to get started and where you can do to either get the job done or find more information.

This book will provide you with some *basic marketing strategies for fledgling online businesses*. These tips are *not* for people who already have lists, or people who are already make steady sales. They're for *beginners* – people who are just getting started, and who are willing to put in the time and effort it takes to start building a profitable long-term business. They're meant to give you a "headstart" – and once you've begun to establish your business, you can continue your marketing education and begin ramping up your profits big-time.

Ready to get started? You can print out this eBook if you like, then hole-punch it and place it in a binder. That way you'll have easy and convenient access to it to make notes. Please **take action** on the information you find in this manual – information by itself won't do any good unless it's put to use!

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## Lessons Learned

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Over the years I've learned a lot (and continue to learn something new every day) – here are just a few of the more important points I want to emphasize:

- **You don't have to spend money on marketing... but doing so can help increase your profits significantly AND help you start making money faster.** If you're on a tight budget, work slowly and steadily towards long-term profitability. Once you begin to bring in sales, reinvest a portion of it back into marketing.
- **Don't give up because of one failure.** Marketing is not an exact science because the people you market to are all unique individuals. Experience is a great teacher. If you try a method once and it fails miserably, that doesn't mean it won't work for you. Try it again... and again... and again, until you can truthfully say that you've done the best you can with that technique. Every business is responsible for experimenting, testing, tracking, and refining their marketing techniques to take advantage of what works best for their specific business.

- **Expect to work hard.** There will always be people who choose not to put forth the effort necessary to make their business work. The internet offers many advantages, but it's not a magical place where people flock to your website and then whip out their credit cards, desperate to give you money. An internet business is still a business. Period.
- **Build for the long-term.** It's tempting to go for the 'fast buck'... but things *do* get easier and potentially much more profitable when, for example, you've taken the time to gradually build a responsive opt-in list of your own.
- **Attitude plays a big role in success.** While I wouldn't go so far as to say that a positive attitude can "guarantee" success, a self-defeating attitude is sure to lead to failure. Failure isn't bad in itself – not every attempt will be successful – but if you believe you're doomed to fail, you *will*. Aim for success.
- **You are in control of your future.** Some people are dreamers... they have big dreams but they procrastinate or make excuses. They place blame on a busy lifestyle, not enough money to invest into the business ("if I had just a little more money I could turn this business into a huge success"), the economy ("sales are slow for everyone, I can't do anything about it"), and so forth. If you want a successful business, then you have to *make* it happen.
- "You can either make excuses or you can make money... you can't do both!"
- **You have to consciously *decide* to work towards the future you envision.** That may entail making changes to your attitude, to your work habits, etc. Remember, if you keep doing the same things, you'll keep getting the same results.

## The Truth About Building a Business on the 'Net

I'm not going to get into all the hype surrounding making money online; you've probably heard too much already. In brief, there is *no such thing as get-rich-quick*. You *can* earn a solid income from the Internet – but you have to be willing to put in the time, effort, and yes, even some money.

**Starting a business online is in many ways the same as starting a business in the 'real world'.** It requires hard work, long hours, and yes, even some sacrifices. Some people turn a profit within just a few months; others take years. There are lots of 'little guys' -- small, home based businesses -- who are happily and successfully earning a living from the Internet. Here are the 'straight goods' on building an online business:

<b>ADVANTAGES:</b>	<b>DISADVANTAGES:</b>
<p><b>Opportunity is everywhere!</b> The Internet reaches a worldwide audience with a wide variety of interests. There are countless niches on which you can focus your energies.</p>	<p><b>Hard work and long hours.</b> Building a successful business – regardless of whether it's online or offline -- requires a great deal of effort. Patience, persistence, and determination are all necessary.</p>
<p><b>Exciting!</b> If you thrive on change, the Internet is one of the best places to get it.</p>	<p><b>Always changing.</b> What works online today might not work tomorrow. You need the ability to adapt to changes and move forward.</p>
<p><b>Ever-growing.</b> Every day more and more people get 'connected' to the 'net. And over time, people become increasingly comfortable making purchases online – a big plus for online merchants!</p>	<p><b>Too much 'hype'.</b> You'll find plenty of misleading promises on the Internet, many which claim there's some sort of 'magic bullet' to getting sales. There isn't. Sorting through marketing techniques that work and those that don't can be very time-consuming.</p>
<p><b>Possibility of more free time -- eventually.</b> Some types of online businesses can be automated to a certain extent. Automation will help to reduce your workload and free up your time.</p>	<p><b>Definitely *not* a quick-rich-quick scheme!</b> Regardless of what you may read, the Internet is <i>not</i> the path to quick, easy money and not everyone will be successful online. An online business contains an element of risk, just like any other business.</p>
<p><b>Testing, research, and marketing online are relatively cheap.</b> There's so much you can do on the Internet for little or no money.</p>	<p><b>"Build it and they will come" is a myth.</b> Your web page is only one of billions. You have to learn how to get the <i>right</i> people to your little corner of cyberspace.</p>
<p><b>Flexible.</b> Because your work is done on your computer and from home, you get to choose when you work.</p>	<p><b>Persistence is vital to your success.</b> There's a lot to learn! It's very easy to give up and try something else online... but jumping from one opportunity to another isn't going to help you make money any faster.</p>

<b>Affordable startup costs.</b> You can get started with just a few hundred bucks.	<b>Overwhelming.</b> There's so much information to sort through and so many choices that some people may feel "paralyzed" with indecision.
<b>Multiple streams of income.</b> You have the ability to sell lots of different products online -- including other company's products, in return for a commission -- which means that you can potentially earn several 'pay checks'! A bunch of 'smaller' checks may not seem like much on their own, but add them all up and they can become a solid stream of income.	<b>So much to choose from.</b> It's very easy to get caught up in the multitude of opportunities available online... but in so doing, many people end up with several unprofitable businesses instead of one profitable business. It's essential to choose or create a good opportunity and then focus your efforts on making it profitable.

## Frequently Asked Questions

Before we really get into things, let's address a few questions that most beginners face. I'm a huge fan of doing business on the Internet...but at the same time, there's enough hype and misinformation that I think it's worth the time and space to quickly go over a few things first.

**Question:** Is it *really* possible to make money on the Internet?

**Answer:** Yes. Many people are successfully and quietly earning an income online, whether it's just a "little extra" to help out with household expenses each month, or a full-time money-making venture that lets them lead the lifestyle they choose.

Every day I browse through certain message boards, and it disturbs me to see people – usually the same people – constantly complaining that it's "impossible" to make money online. It has a lot to do with attitude... if you believe it to be impossible, then you're already defeated before you even begin!

Like I mentioned earlier, not every attempt will be successful. Early in my online ventures I published an eBook that I thought was great... but no one else did. I tried my best, it didn't work, so I put it down to a learning experience and tried again. "Failure" isn't a big deal unless you *make* it a big deal. Remember that it's a *temporary condition*.

The people who are successfully reaching their goals online – and there are many! – are the ones who are willing to put forth the time, effort, and even funds to make it work.

**Question:** How much do I have to spend getting started?

**Answer:** It's reasonable to expect to spend at least a few hundred dollars. Your biggest expense will probably be marketing – and it's impossible to say how much you'll spend, since it depends on what methods you use to promote your business.

Regardless, it's a tradeoff between *time* and *money*. Here's an example: if you decide you want to write articles for reprint in other newsletters, you have to find a list of editors within your market who accept article submissions. You can do this by going to any free ezine directory and manually searching for the appropriate newsletters and email addresses, then verifying that the information is up-to-date... or you can purchase a membership into frequently-updated, searchable database of ezines. It's simple and fast to get a list of ezines that accept submissions.

The free ezine directory saves you money but costs you time – time that could be spent doing other productive tasks. The paid membership site saves you time but costs you money, which you could probably put to another good use for your business. You'll have to decide which one is more valuable to you at this point in your business.

**Question:** How much will I make?

**Answer:** That varies depending on the person. Doing business online is still *doing business* – it doesn't matter if it's on the Internet or in the 'real world'. So the question of *how long* it will take before you start earning money, or *how much* you'll earn depends on a lot of factors including your current skills, willingness and ability to learn, adaptability, whether you have a list of (legitimate and targeted) contacts, how much time you have, and how hard you work.

Many people make a small supplementary income, just a few hundred bucks a month. Others aim for a few thousand, and still others earn a six-figure income. *No one* can tell you how much you'll make – that's in *your* hands.

However, despite all the hype about "making money online", I don't think it's necessary to strive to "be rich" (how much is ever "rich enough"?). Figure out how much you want to earn to be comfortable and live the lifestyle you want... then work towards it. Personally, I prefer to give up

some income in exchange for time I can spend with my family, friends, and doing stuff that's important to *me* – and that *doesn't* include being chained to my desk!

**Question:** What are the most effective and fastest ways to market my online business?

**Answer:** That's something you have to figure out specifically for your own business. There are many 'tried and true' methods that *generally* work well, but not every business experiences the same results as another. That's why you're responsible for tracking your marketing efforts so that you can refine them and continue to build upon your successes.

Use the methods that are the most effective for your business, weighed against the time, effort, and money it requires. For instance, I write a lot of articles and distribute them for reprint – I'm a relatively fast writer, I write my own content for my newsletters anyways, and I find it a quick and effective way to reach my audience. Someone else may hate to write but loves to 'tweak' and test his listings on the pay-per-click search engines – and he gets great results. Find the methods that work *for you*.

Keep in mind that the 'fastest' way to get results isn't necessarily the 'best' way. For example, gradually building a responsive opt-in list is one of the best things you can do for your business, but it certainly won't be 'fast'! However, you'll be able to market your own products to your list time and time again, as well as leverage the list for mutually beneficial joint ventures with other businesses. In other words, your list is a good way to work towards *long-term profitability*.

So experiment with new things. Test. And then dump the methods that aren't working well for you, and keep and refine those that do.

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## That Dirty Four-Letter Word Called 'Spam'

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Every online business owner needs to be aware of **spam**, the practice of sending unsolicited, untargeted mass commercial messages. There are serious consequences to spamming (including suspension or termination by your web host, affiliate program, etc) – and it's poor business practice anyways. First of all, it's *untargeted marketing* -- spammers email a mish-mash of people, most of whom have no interest whatsoever in what you have to offer. Spammers hope

that just by sheer numbers alone they'll make a few sales. And it's not without risk: there are plenty of "anti-spammers" who will take the time to track you down and report you to the appropriate authorities.

Everyone has an opinion of what constitutes spamming and what doesn't. In a nutshell, you need to have someone's permission before you email them. Spam works on the principle of numbers - the more people you email, the more sales you make. However:

**Spam *might* make you a quick buck ... but it's no way to build a viable long-term business.**

It's just not worth it -- there are plenty of legitimate ways to market your business without spamming!

### Generally Agreed-Upon Rules of "Netiquette"

- **Don't harvest email addresses from message boards, classified ads, websites, etc.** You do not have the right to send your offer to someone whose address you picked off a website. Likewise, don't use email harvesting software robots to do the work for you – it's still spam, regardless of whether you did it by hand or a robot did it for you.
- **Don't indiscriminately post ads to message boards.** Message boards have rules, and moderators to ensure the rules are followed. Many boards will allow you to post a link at the end of your message... but beware: they don't look kindly upon someone who breezes in, leaves a link, and then disappears.
- **Don't add someone to your mailing list just because they've asked you a question.** It's okay to mail them a polite follow-up that directly relates to their question, but *not* okay to bombard them with offers.
- **Don't spam newsletter editors!** Subscribing to a publication does not give you the right to send offers to the editor.
- **Don't spam newsletter lists.** This is related to the above. I get loads of "offers" which state, *"You are receiving this information because we belong to same opt-in list. If you no longer wish to receive messages, you'll have to unsubscribe to the list."* These spammers hope to get access to my entire list of subscribers by spamming my newsletter's email address. There is *no way* that any self-respecting editor would subject their subscribers to a constant barrage of spam.

- **Don't indiscriminately send offers to other webmasters.** You may have downloaded their free eBook, ordered some advertising, or somehow done business with them. That doesn't mean they're interested in any "hot new opportunities" or "incredible new products".

### So What's NOT Spam?

- **Using autoresponders to capture prospect's email addresses.** An autoresponder is an email address that's set up to automatically reply to any inquiries with a predefined message. For example, you could put up a link on your site that says, "Top 10 Considerations Before Adopting a Dog! Click here to have this information emailed to you". Your visitor clicks on the link, sends off an email, and your autoresponder replies with the article.
- **Mailing to your own opt-in newsletter.** Many successful online businesses run a free newsletter of some sort. Provided your subscribers have all explicitly requested to join your newsletter (you cannot just add them because they've communicated with you sometime in the past), then you can email them. It's one of the many "perks" of having your own list!
- **Use of (opt-in) ezine advertising.** You can purchase ads in various newsletters, but be cautious - make sure the editor has a strictly *opt-in* list!
- **Following up with a prospect.** If someone asks you a question about your product, it's okay to send a nice follow-up email a few days later. Just don't add them to any 'list' and do not continue to bombard them with offers.

Spam is a very touchy subject. There are plenty more "rules" I could print ... but the fact of the matter is, everyone has a different definition of spam. It's better to be cautious if in doubt!

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## Traffic Tips and Myths

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You've probably seen all sorts of sites claiming they can get you loads of traffic. It's true that you need a reasonable amount of traffic if you expect to earn money – but instead of trying to get as much traffic as you possibly can, focus on getting **targeted traffic**.

For example, there are plenty of sites that will "drive" traffic to your website by partnering you with other sites in their system. This traffic is mostly useless: most of these are people trying to earn

enough “credits” to get their own website displayed, so you end up with visitors who have no interest in what you’re selling. They’re just ‘traffic’ for the sake of getting traffic!

That’s why I’m rarely impressed when someone trumpets that they get 1 million hits a month. Personally, I would much rather get 100 highly-targeted, interested prospects than 10 million visitors who do nothing more than click off to another site without a glance. **Traffic, by itself, means nothing. SALES are what you’re after!**

## Not-So-Effective Traffic-Generating Methods

There are loads of ways to get ‘traffic’. Later in this manual you’ll find many excellent and effective free or low-cost ways to promote your business, but for now, let’s take a quick look at some of the stuff that’s probably not worth your time (at least, it sure wasn’t worth mine!). I don’t want to spend too much time on this... but it’s still worth mentioning briefly.

- **Free-For-All (FFA) sites.** I can’t believe there are still people advocating these sites. I’ve never had a good experience with them – in fact, the results were downright *pathetic* – and I don’t know of anyone who has. FFA sites allow you to post your link alongside thousands of others doing exactly the same thing. What normally happens is that you end up with a bunch of junk mail in your email box (“confirmation messages” and spam mail).

Some people believe that it helps your “link popularity” (used by many major search engines to help determine your ranking). Not true. These are *untargeted* links, on an obvious “link farm” and often times your link drops off the bottom of the page very quickly in order to make room for new links being posted.

Another reason some people advocated FFA sites is to “get hits”. Again, I disagree. Aside from being untargeted, most people visit FFA sites to *post* a link, not to read them.

You can still find places that sell you your very own FFA site. As the owner, you’re supposed to have the “right” to email a “confirmation message” (which typically contains your sales pitch) to everyone who posts a link on your site. I speak from a not-very-pleasant personal experience when I say that *it doesn’t work*. You run a high risk of being reported as a “spammer” and getting shut down, even if you explicitly stated that posters agree to receive one email message from you. Spam is in the eye of the beholder.

- **Free classifieds.** Yeah, it's tempting to post to free classified ad sites because, well, it's free. But remember: *"free" isn't a bargain if you don't get results!* You still put in the time and effort, which is wasted.

Most people go to free classified ad sites to post their own ads, not read them. I tested it out myself by purchasing classified ad submission software and blasting my ads out regularly to the "top" free classified sites for several months. Not a single sale. Barely any hits. A total waste of \$100 for the software! Are there exceptions? Perhaps... but I haven't personally found any (yet).

- **Start page programs.** Basically, these programs provide you with an opportunity to band together with a bunch of other sites to get traffic. You each set your 'start page' to a specific URL, and a script rotates through the participating sites and displays one everytime you open your browser (there may be additional conditions attached).

I've tried several of these programs with pretty dismal results. Most people appear to be using the program to earn enough "credits" to get their own site displayed; they're not actually interested in viewing any of the other sites.

If you do want to try a start page program, set your web page to a specific action-oriented page (such as a direct sales letter or a newsletter subscription form) that's as targeted to the people joining the network as you can manage.

- **Exit page programs.** These work in much the same way as a start page network. But this time, one of the sites in the network pops up as the visitor leaves your site. Again, I've had poor results... probably because most people are just interested in getting more 'hits' rather than displaying any real interest in the other sites in the network.
- **"Safe lists"**. In short, don't use them! "Safe lists", in my experience, are nothing but harvested email addresses. The recipients are not likely to be pleased to receive unsolicited email and your risk of being shut down due to "spam" is high. Legitimate email lists exist, but they'll cost you a pretty penny... don't be fooled into believing you can email millions of people for a couple hundred bucks.
- **Banner ads.** Unless you are advertising in a high-traffic and very targeted website, the cost of a banner ad probably won't give you a good rate of return. Surfers are accustomed to seeing banners and for the most part, they're easily ignored.

- **Link or banner exchanges.** You can join a network of webmasters who display one another's banners or links on their websites (banners and links are rotated via a script). I haven't had much success with these either... although you can usually specify which category you want to be placed in, you don't have any control over the sites that join the network/category. That means you could be displaying a link or banner you don't approve of, one for a direct competitor, etc.

And finally, just a quick word on the 'latest-and-greatest' traffic fads... you'll see them all over the place, being touted on websites and in eBooks, particularly when it comes to getting a good position on the search engines. Learning new things is necessary – but exercise caution: "cutting edge" techniques that work today may not work tomorrow.

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## Identifying Your Market

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### Targeting Your Audience

It always surprises me how many "Internet malls" pop up online. You know the type: sites that sell everything from egg beaters to cat condos, from Internet marketing manuals to online dating services.

In the "real world", malls are helpful: they give you a variety of stores to choose from so that you can do your shopping all at once. On the Internet, however, surfers have the ability to specifically search for what they want through search engines, directories, and links from other sites.

**"Location" is not a big deal on the Internet; another website is only a click away.**

By creating a highly targeted site you can concentrate on drawing visitors who are already interested in the types of products you sell. It's far easier to sell specialty pet beds to a pet lover than it is to sell bookkeeping software to a pet lover!

Your [target market \(or target audience\)](#) is simply a specific group of people with the same interests or needs. For example, your Internet business could cater to:

- Poodle breeders;
- Single moms;
- Computer game junkies;
- Fitness enthusiasts;

- Comic book collectors;
- Orchid lovers;
- “Cheapskates”

## Suggestions for Choosing a Target Market

Your choice of a target market will dictate everything you do online: what you write, which products you offer, where you advertise, etc. Here are a few suggestions on generating ideas for a target audience.

### Choose a market related to your job skills.

What skills have you picked up through education or your current line of work? Can you market these skills online? For example,

- **Administrative assistants** may have superior organizational skills that they can use to offer online planning or reminder services.
- **Programmers and engineers** may be able to write custom scripts and sell licenses for their use.
- **Construction workers** may be able to create a series of tips booklets on "inside information" prospective home owners should know before selecting a builder.
- **Stay-at-home parents** may be able to offer child-care tips, information on how to evaluate a daycare, or advice on finding the right school.

### Choose a market related to a passion or an interest.

Are you a hobby gardener? A fan of Rhythm 'n Blues music? A proponent of wiping out work-at-home scams? One thing to be aware of is that turning a hobby into a business may "ruin" it for you ... you may not like the feeling of being "forced" to come up with new content, new products, etc. You may simply prefer to keep your hobby exactly that: a hobby.

Then again, you may adore it - imagine, getting paid to do what you love! I know several people who have turned their passions into businesses, and not only do they make money, but they also have a good time while they're at it.

**Choose a market that fills an unanswered need.**

Can you think of a product or service that you wished existed ... but you haven't been able to find it anywhere? If so, chances are that others have as well. The question is whether or not there's a market large enough for you to tap into and make a decent profit. For example, doggy bakeries that offer gourmet doggy treats never existed until a few years ago – and now they're springing up all over the place to fill demand!

**Choose an existing market - and improve on what's offered.**

There are thousands of websites that claim to have the answer to finding a work-at-home job. If you were to try and break into this market, you could "specialize" a bit more: do you want to cater to work-at-home moms? Work-at-home *dads*? Freelance writers? Technical jobs?

Take a look at what your competitors are doing -- can you offer something unique or improve upon what's already out there? Can you offer better service, more personalized service, "extras" that no one else has, a different point of view? The more saturated your market, the harder it will be to make money.

Regardless of what you choose, consider whether or not you can stick with it for the long haul. Do you have the motivation, knowledge, and interest to offer up-to-date content to your audience? Do you have the skills and desire to create new products, or are there good affiliate programs available? Will you be able to sustain your interest and motivation in your business of choice?

## **Is the Internet an Ideal Medium for Your Business?**

The Internet offers an amazing opportunity for the "average" person to make money selling products and services (whether his own, or those of another company's). However, not all products sell equally well online. Ask yourself:

- **Is there a more convenient alternative?** Products that aren't easily available at a local store have a better chance of selling online. Not only is it often more convenient to simply drop in and pick up whatever you need, the customer isn't hit with additional shipping or handling charges (which can be quite daunting when shipping heavy products).

Here's a simple illustration. I have a household full of pets. As such, I'm often running to the pet store to pick up more food. At one point I had investigated ordering it online -- imagine, door-to-door delivery! -- but in the end, I decided against it. Not only would I have to wait for it to be delivered to me, but the shipping costs were nearly as much as the cost of the food! It was easier and cheaper for me to just pop into the store.

- **Is your product something a customer needs to feel or see before making a purchase?** An example is a wedding dress: most women want to try it on, walk around in it, and simply see how they look and feel in the dress before they purchase it.

That's not to say that you won't be able to sell something that the customer may prefer to see/feel; if your marketing is good enough, you might actually make a great many sales. However, you run the risk of higher return rates from customers that discover that the product doesn't fit or didn't meet their expectations -- which means less profit and more hassle for you.

- **Are customers normally cautious about buying your type of product, even offline?** Many people are still naturally hesitant to purchase anything online. So if you're selling something that they normally hesitate to buy in the real world, then your challenges are compounded.

For instance, some people don't think the services of a financial planner are necessary -- they might only make an appointment with one due to persuasion on the part of family or friends. They discuss their situation with the financial planner and make a decision about whether or not they feel they can work together.

Now imagine if a financial planner sets up shop online. He claims that he's wildly successful, and offers to help manage your money over the phone or by email. Most would probably hesitate to take him up on the offer -- without actually *meeting* him, viewing his office, etc. it's harder to gauge his honesty or credibility.

Some websites sell brand-name items to try to establish a sense of credibility. These sites have the advantage of name recognition, which can help to inspire trust in the customer and thus sales [one site that offers affiliate programs for well-known brands is [QuinStreet](#)].

- **Is there a market for your product, at the price at which you intend to sell it?** This is what it all boils down to. There has to be sufficient demand for your product at a price that allows you to earn a reasonable profit after all expenses are paid. For example, if it costs \$10 to manufacture a product and your optimum price (the price that allows you to sell at maximum profit) is \$10.50, is it really worth the effort?
- **Is your target market likely to use the Internet?** Be aware that some audiences just don't tend to use the Internet much -- or they use it sparingly. For example, you're going to have a hard time if you target a bunch of retired folks who are terrified of technology, or low-income families who may not have access to a computer.

## Researching Your Market

Because change happens so often and so quickly -- particularly online -- businesses have to keep up-to-date with changing customer wants or trends. Research helps you to:

- **Learn about your market.** What do your consumers want? Where do they congregate, and how do you contact them? Do they prefer contact by postal mail, email, flyers, trade shows, etc...?
- **Determine the demand for a product or service.** Every business contains an element of risk, but with proper research you'll get a good feel for the type of product or service your market is looking for. **Find out what your market wants, then create a product that satisfies that want.** Don't create a product first and then try to find a market for it... that's a common mistake that can lead to wasted time, effort, and dollars!
- **Adapt and thrive.** New opportunities present themselves all the time! So long as you see changes happening, you can adjust your products, services, or business practices to work with them.

Some of the following links will be more suitable for your specific market, while others provide some great 'general information' -- stuff that online business owners should be aware of.

### 'Formal' Research Tools and Links

- [PitneyBowes](#) maintains a list of links to various research studies, including direct mail and eCommerce studies.
- [CyberAtlas](#) offers a wide variety of informative articles and stats, from market information (ie. wireless, healthcare, finance, education, small business, travel...) to "the big picture" (ie. demographics, geographics, hardware...). It's primarily about the effect the Internet is having on us, or about how people use the Internet. I often find useful tidbits of information in their [Traffic Patterns](#) section. [Click here](#) for a convenient summary of all the stats, tables, articles, etc. that have run on the site.
- [NUA Surveys](#) is one of the best sites I've found that offer internet trends and statistics. You can even narrow it down by 'sector' (ie. advertising, auto industry, travel, health/medical, financial services...). Well worth a look.
- [Forrester Research](#) offers reports emerging trends in technology and their impact on business. Again, you can narrow it down to whatever category you're interested in.
- [BizMiner](#) features 'hard-to-find' information for a fee: industry financial, market research, and business planning reports. Take a look at the available free samples to see if it's the type of information you're searching for. [MarketResearch.com](#) is similar.
- [FedStats](#) is a government page that offers all sorts of statistical data, as well as links to other federal agencies that offer statistics.

### 'General' Research Tools and Links

- [Overture's Search Suggestion Tool](#) can be used to brainstorm keywords and phrases that your customers may use to find your products and services. Often times I'll type these same key phrases back into a search engine like [Google](#) to see who my competitors are and how they're doing business.
- [Yahoo](#) has a list of message boards and chats. It's handy to hear feedback directly from your intended audience -- and message boards are a good way to do that, *if* you become a contributing member. The 'regulars' on the board are more likely to offer you helpful feedback if they know you're there to participate, rather than to simply drop a survey and then leave. *Please familiarize yourself with the rules of each board before you participate.*

If you're unsure whether or not posting your survey is appropriate, contact the board moderator(s) for permission.

- [BoardReader](#) is a convenient tool that searches multiple message boards across the web for the key words/phrases you specify.
- [Media Finder](#) is a good place to search for magazines in your market. Search for trade magazines in particular (if applicable); they often offer useful information about upcoming events, reader interests, etc.
- [The Trade Show News Network](#) is a searchable database of trade shows all over the world and across a wide variety of industries. Attending trade shows is a great way to learn about it -- identify your competitors, view the products, read the literature, etc.
- [Tracerlock](#) is a time-saving tool that automatically scans web pages for your list of key words or phrases. It highlights them when found, so that you can quickly determine whether or not you want to continue researching the site.
- [Lifestyles Publishing](#) offers an excellent, well-organized, searchable database of ezines that accept advertising. It's a membership-based site that prides itself on up-to-date information. One thing you can do is send surveys to those ezines within your market, by purchasing a solo ad/exclusive mailing to these lists. You may also want to subscribe, to see what topics are of interest to the readers, and to get some insights into how the business is run.

### Other Sources of Help

- **If you need to hire a researcher**, some of the sites mentioned above offer research services. An alternative is to [hire a freelancer](#). If you choose to hire a freelancer, be sure to view customer feedback, portfolios, etc. before making your decision.
- [The US Small Business Administration](#) is an excellent source of information for both people in the startup phase and those further along. Lots of great links and resources.

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## The Importance of Customer Service

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*Treat your customers the way you want to be treated.*

I can't tell you how many times I've seen businesses publicly slammed for their unresponsive, unhelpful, or even outright rude service. And believe me, word spreads fast!

But aside from the negative publicity, there are other reasons for providing great service: namely, **repeat business** and **referral business**. It's far easier to sell additional products to a happy customer than it is to try to acquire a new customer who knows nothing about you or your company. Likewise, if you tell a friend about the great product you bought, they're much more likely to seriously consider purchasing it for themselves than if they just "happened" upon your website.

So what constitutes good customer service?

- **Prompt reply to email.** Many small businesses typically reply within 1-3 days. Keep in mind that some people don't realize that there are actually real people on the other end of that Internet connection who have to read and reply to their email – they expect it to be instantaneous! So a simple statement like, "You will receive a reply within 72 hours" lets customers know what to expect.

Make sure you learn how to effectively use your email software – it will help you tremendously with how fast you can organize and reply to messages! Email filters, folders, and priority labelling are all ways to help you get organized, fast. If you get a lot of spam email, consider using [MailWasher](#) to help you filter it out.

- **Courtesy and professionalism.** For instance, let's say you offer a "no questions asked" 100% satisfaction guaranteed refund. If someone emails you a refund request, handle it promptly – and with no questions asked. Another example: you may receive criticisms or other negative feedback. If it's a valid criticism (try to be objective!), then reply professionally. If it's someone just being a jerk, then just delete the email (unfortunately, it does happen – the "anonymity" of the web encourages some people to behave like they

never would in the real world). Also remember that it's easy to misinterpret words on a screen. Choose your words carefully.

- **Treat customers with respect.** Listen!

**If you make a mistake, try to fix it.** Mistakes happen. It's just a fact of life. If, for instance, your customer doesn't receive your product, then personally see that it gets to them – even consider including a small 'bonus' for the inconvenience. Customer service has become increasingly important, and it can only do your business good if you treat it as a serious issue.

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## Domain Names: Your 'Address' on the Web

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### An Introduction to Domain Names

#### What's a Domain?

Your domain is simply your address on the web, the "www.yourcompany.com". It's what people type into their web browsers when they want to visit your business online.

#### The Who and Why of Domains

"Who needs a domain?" is easily answered: anyone who is serious about doing business online (hopefully that's you!). There is nothing that screams, '**AMATEUR!**' more than a domain that looks something like:

[http://www.freeprovider.com/~users/a\\_to\\_d/yourname/starthere.html](http://www.freeprovider.com/~users/a_to_d/yourname/starthere.html)

**Your own domain provides a number of advantages, such as brand recognition and credibility.** Don't underestimate the power of credibility; if you look and act like a serious business, you are much more likely to earn the trust and respect of your visitors. People tend to buy from those they trust.

#### “Why Can't I Start With a Free Domain?”

You can. However, there are a few potential roadblocks you can run into if you start on a free domain and then move to your own later on:

- **If you have to move your site, your promotion efforts are wasted.** Let's say you have a website on a free host, located at:

`http://www.freeprovider.com/~users/a_to_d/yourname/starthere.html`

You spend long months promoting this URL in newsletters, articles, links, search engines, and everywhere else you can find. And you're finally starting to see results!

Then one day you get a notice from your host: free hosting services are being discontinued. That means your marketing efforts are all for naught – you have to find a new web host with a brand new URL, which means anyone who finds links to:

`http://www.freeprovider.com/~users/a_to_d/yourname/starthere.html`

... will be faced with a missing page. Getting your own domain name will allow you to move from web host to web host without having to worry about wasting your marketing efforts.

- **Your ideal domain name could be taken.** Domain names go fast - especially .com names - and by the time you're ready, yours might already be gone! Of course, a domain name by itself will not "make or break" a business. But most people will agree that a catchy, short, or memorable name can help your business.
- **It's difficult to make sales from a free website.** You simply don't have credibility when your URL is 75 characters long, filled with dashes, slashes, and other strange characters, and your website is littered with ads from your free hosting provider. It will also be more difficult to get listed in the major indexes, which are great sources of targeted traffic. If you browse human-reviewed directories such as [Yahoo](#), you'll find very few sites hosted on free domains.

## Tips on How to Choose an Effective Domain Name

Many domain brainstorming tools are available online. They'll automatically come up with a number of suggestions for you, and they may trigger some original thoughts of your own. One of these is [NameBoy](#) - just type in a key word or two, and NameBoy will come up with a list of available domain names, domains for sale, and more. Try to select a domain name that:

- **Is easy to say and to spell.** This is very helpful when you -- or someone else -- is mentioning your site to others. Try saying your domain name out loud before making a decision to purchase it. Would a casual listener be able to figure out how to spell it?
- **Does not contain hyphens.** Aside from being hard to type, hyphens are hard to remember and difficult to convey in speech. For example, let's say my company is called "ABC Credit Repair". I could register the domain [abccreditrepair.com](http://abccreditrepair.com), easy enough to remember. But what about [abc-creditrepair.com](http://abc-creditrepair.com) or perhaps [abc-credit-repair.com](http://abc-credit-repair.com)? Most people won't remember where the hyphen(s) is supposed to go.
- **Is not likely to be mistaken.** For example, a domain called [shoppe.com](http://shoppe.com) vs. [shop.com](http://shop.com) is confusing - you would have to actually explain how to spell your domain.
- **Ends in .com, if at all possible.** Sure, there are plenty of other extensions - but when people think of the Internet, they automatically think of '.com'.
- **Is easy to remember.** Try to keep your domain name as short as possible; a short URL is more memorable.

## Registering a Domain

You can reserve a domain from any number of places on the web. They generally range in price from around \$7 a year to \$35 a year. Here are a few places that will register a domain for you:

- [GoDaddy](#) (the one I use)
- [000Domains](#)
- [123Domains](#)

You simply check to see if the domain name you want is available. If it is, you prepay for a year or more, and usually within 24-72 hours, the domain is yours to use. A few points to remember:

- **You have to renew your domain name periodically in order to continue using it.** Most people pay for domain names on an annual basis, but many registrars now permit multiple-year registrations (which can also save you a few bucks).
- **Use a reliable registrar.** They should notify you when your domain name is about to expire. It would be a real shame to lose your domain just because you didn't know it was up for renewal!



One thing I want to emphasize is to take a look at a number of factors when choosing a web host - **do NOT make price your only consideration!** You may suffer the consequences of lost profits if you choose a company that offers cheap hosting, no service, and poor reliability. Some things to look for are:

- **Fast, reliable connection.** Your site must load fast - one of the major reasons visitors click away from a website is slow loading time. Reliability speaks for itself: if your visitor can't even reach your website, there's no way you'll make a sale.
- **Excellent uptime.** If your web host's servers go down, then your website also goes down! That translates into lost profits. On the web, you often only have one opportunity to make an impression; blow that opportunity and your prospect can easily click away to a competitor's site. Sign up for a trial hosting account if you can, and then monitor your site for uptime or downtime. One tool that will do this for you is [NetMechanic](#). Many web hosts also operate message boards – consider asking some of their customers about their experiences with the host. First-hand experiences are very useful, and you don't want to base your decision solely on the customer testimonials that the web host provides.
- **Site/data backups.** It would be devastating to lose all your hard work. A web host that performs regular backups provides an extra measure of protection "just in case." Some will provide you with a utility to do your own backups. *This is YOUR business – so make sure that you regularly make backups of your own... just in case!* I backup my files once a week, and after every major revision.
- **Plenty of storage space.** It's hard to say how much space an "average site" uses. That depends on the length of the web pages and the number and size of the graphics used. Make sure you have at least enough for your current and projected short or mid-term needs. You can always purchase more space if you need it.
- **Adequate transfer space.** Everytime someone views a web page, they're actually downloading data. Look for a hosting package that gives you more than you need (with a comfortable margin – although most people never have to worry about exceeding their allocated bandwidth).
- **CGI bin.** Many web hosts will provide you with some standard CGI scripts for things such as counters, forms, and passwords. Find out what types of "standard" free scripts they offer for your use.

Also make sure you have the ability to create and upload your own CGI scripts, what web hosts typically refer to as your own "cgi-bin". You should not be restricted to what the web host offers. Ask questions like, Can you install these scripts on your own without requesting permission from your host? Will your host charge you for each script you install?

You might be thinking, "I don't know how to program my own CGI scripts, so who cares whether or not I have my own cgi-bin?" One of the nice things about the Internet is that there are countless CGI scripts available. You can easily learn to install simple scripts yourself, or hire someone to do it for you.

- **Secure server capability.** Secure servers allow you to transmit pages in an encrypted format. This is necessary if you plan on selling something directly from your website (you'll need it for accepting credit cards, if you don't use what's known as a [third-party processing company](#)). Note that there may be additional fees for the use of a secure server.
- **Autoresponders, email aliases, and mailboxes.** Don't be swayed by offers of "unlimited email accounts" - you probably won't need them. As for autoresponders, web hosts typically offer very basic autoresponders – you will probably want to purchase a professional follow-up autoresponder to complement what you already have through your web host.
- **Mailing lists.** Many web hosts offer a feature where you can create your own mailing list, a handy feature for when you want to start your own newsletter! Note that there are often restrictions on how many lists you can create, and on how many addresses can be on each list.

When you're first starting out on the web, this is a convenient little feature if your host offers it to you for free. That means you might not have to pay for mailing list software of your own if money is tight. I still recommend a professional list host or autoresponder to manage your list (more on that topic later).

- **Web stats/analysis software.** Analyzing your traffic is an important part of doing business online. Common stats include number of page views, number of unique visitors, referrers (where your visitors are coming from), browsers, and other such information. A host that offers good site demographics can save you from purchasing another service.
- **Web-based interface.** Most web hosts will offer a web interface for you to do administrative tasks, such as setting up autoresponders, email aliases, uploading or downloading files, and so on. An easy-to-use web interface can make managing your site a breeze!

- **Unlimited, free, responsive 24/7 customer service.** Make sure you can get the help you need, when you need it – preferably not just through email or even “live chat”, but also by *phone*. Contact a prospective web host with questions *before* you sign up for their services. That way you'll be able to get an idea of how promptly they respond to your concerns, and how helpful they are. Make sure they treat you with *respect!*

Prompt service isn't enough, though. Support staff should be qualified, trained, technical professionals who know how to talk to customers.

## Finding a Host

Compare a number of web hosts with each other, and see who offers the best value for your money. There are a number of places where you can find a list of web hosts, including:

- Your local Yellow Pages
- [Web Host Directory](#)
- [TopHosts.com](#)
- [The Web Host Industry Review](#)

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# The Basic Types of Online Marketing

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## Targeted Marketing

Who is your target audience, what do they want, and how do you reach them? Understanding your audience is the first step to a successful marketing campaign. There are lots of ways to reach your target audience, including:

- **Search engines and major indexes.** Visitors search by key phrase or category... if your site appears within the first page or two of the search results, then these targeted and interested prospects can more easily find *you*, rather than you having to find them. A good listing can continue to bring in targeted traffic without any additional effort. Well worth it!

Don't forget about the pay-per-click search engines, too. There you can bid on specific key phrases to draw your audience to your business.

- **Ezine advertising.** Let another business do the hard work of building a list of opt-in subscribers who are eager and interested in a particular topic. Depending on the quality of the newsletter, ezine advertising can present you with an excellent opportunity to reach your target audience at a very small cost.
- **Joint ventures.** Find businesses that offer complementary products or services and propose a mutually beneficial partnership. JVs can be an extremely powerful way to boost your profits -- often without having to incur any out-of-pocket expenses.
- **Offline advertising.** Remember that a great many people are still in the "real world", rather than in cyberspace! More on offline advertising is available later in this manual.


 The [complete Online Business Basics manual](#) covers these topics in much more detail, including practical tips you can instantly put into use. And although the manual is primarily about online marketing, there's a special section devoted to covering some of the basics of marketing your product in the "real world".

## Permission Marketing

Permission marketing is exactly what it sounds like: you receive permission from prospects to send them information, product updates, etc. You don't have to spam in order to get business; people acknowledge that there are products and services for which they're willing to receive information. The Internet has proven this to be true; how many times have you willingly signed up to receive a newsletter? By doing so, you're giving the business permission to email you. Now *you* want to get permission from your own audience to do the same thing!

- **Opt-in newsletter.** Most prospects need to be exposed to your product or service multiple times before they're open to making a purchase. In order to follow-up with your prospects, you'll need a way to contact them -- and their permission to do so. Offering a free newsletter is one way to capture their email addresses for exactly this purpose.

Your newsletter should be used to offer valuable content and not (just) sales pitches. Over time, your readers will come to “know” and trust you; they’ll also become more familiar with your products.

 Read the comprehensive tutorial on how to start, build, and profit from your own newsletter, available in the [complete Online Business Basics manual](#). Everything from layout, to list managers, content, promotion, getting past spam filters, and more. Your own responsive, opt-in list is a vital key to significant long-term profits.

- **Product or service updates.** Haven't you ever signed up to receive product or service updates? I know I have –
  - **Virus updates** from one of the leading anti-virus software companies. They often send out product information, offers, special deals, etc. and I'm happy to receive them.
  - **Product updates** -- for example, from the [Zone Alarm firewall software](#). They also send out special offers and such, along with information about computer security.

... and that's just the beginning. You have your own set of interests and no doubt there are some things you want to know about -- new CDs? Dog toy specials? Coupons or savings?

One company I know gives away a few gift certificates to subscribers every month. The winners are announced in each month's newsletter, and subscribers have to go to the site in order to see the winners list. Once there, some people choose to make a purchase even if they didn't win (I'm one of those people!).

- **Autoresponders.** Offering free reports, stories, email courses, articles, etc. via autoresponder is another great way to keep in touch with your prospects. Just be sure to follow-up; a *series* of emails is far more effective than a single message.

## Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing has to do with the way you treat your visitors, prospects, and customers.

- **Opt-in newsletter.** Newsletters are a great way to stay in touch with your prospects. Write it for them, on topics that interest them -- and encourage feedback. Not only does this give you the opportunity find out what your readers/prospects are actually thinking, but it also gives you a way to invite the prospect to make a purchase.
- **Answering email.** One of the most frustrating things is to have your email go unanswered -- or answered after too long of a waiting period. Customer service has become increasingly important to a growing number of people.
- **Answering the phone and returning calls.** Similar to above, relationship marketing all boils down to treating your customers with respect. Answer your phone promptly and politely, and return missed calls quickly.

## Confidence/Credibility Marketing

Prospects have to trust you and have confidence in your products or services before they're comfortable in making a purchase. So how do you inspire confidence before they've even had a chance to try your product or service?

- **Basic, old-fashioned common-sense.** Let's say you visit a site that sells information on the basics of financial planning. Now imagine that the site is presented against a neon blinking background filled with animated dollar bills falling from the "sky". At the top of the page a headline screams, "Make 1 Million Dollars - Fast!"


In the above example, people looking for financial planning advice are typically looking for solid advice from qualified individuals who are themselves successful at managing their money. The headline looks too much like a "get-rich-quick" deal, and money falling from the sky looks downright "scammy".

Another simple example: sites that claim to be able to show you how to "make your fortune" on the Internet – but they're hosted on free domains! Imagine, a successful money-making business that can't afford a few bucks a year for a domain...?

**Use what's appropriate for your audience.** Know what they're looking for and present your business professionally and appropriately.


- **Testimonials.** Testimonials from satisfied customers are a great way to show prospects that you have happy customers. It's one thing for *you* to say that your product or service is wonderful -- but when *someone else* says it (someone who has nothing to gain from his endorsement), it holds a lot more credibility.

**Be proactive in gathering testimonials.** You may very well have lots of happy customers -- but that doesn't mean they'll let you know! Ask.


 Find out how to utilize the power of testimonials and endorsements in the full [Online Business Basics manual](#). Discover why some testimonials are more effective than others, plus tips on how to get testimonials – even if you have a new product or service. You can also use *your own* testimonial, known as an “endorsement”, to generate more sales... providing you do so selectively!

- **Articles, columns, or interviews.** When you hear or read an ad, you automatically know that the advertiser is trying to sell you something. But when you read an article from a news site or hear an interview on a radio, you're far more likely to perk up and listen. They're usually educational, interesting, and/or entertaining... and so most people are more open to taking a look at what that person or company has to offer. Plus it often appears as if the radio station or news site is recommending your products.

Articles, columns, and interviews all help your business to build credibility as a "leader" in your area. With credibility comes customer confidence! It's wonderful if you can get published on other sites or in other publications other than your own -- it's an implied endorsement.

 Articles, for me, have proven to be consistently effective and profitable. You don't have to be a “professional writer” to take advantage of this method! On the Internet people often feel like they're dealing with a faceless, nameless entity... but you can infuse your articles with your personality and first-hand experiences – something many people truly appreciate. Find out more in the [Online Business Basics manual](#). .

- **Referrals.** There's nothing quite so strong as a referral from a trusted friend or contact! Encourage happy customers to refer others to you; you might even want to offer incentives for doing so.

 Referral marketing often isn't used as much as it can be. It's extremely powerful – and it's relatively “easy”! For example... let's say you go out for a wonderful lobster dinner at the new restaurant in town. It's pricey, but you're delighted with your meal and you had a wonderful time.

You happen to be talking to a friend about dining out, and you give a glowing recommendation about this new seafood restaurant. She's hooked! Because she trusts you and values your opinion, she makes a mental note to schedule a romantic dinner there this weekend.

This is great news for the restaurant! With no additional work at all, they've just scored another customer. And if she's anything like the one who referred her, they now have *two* sets of repeat customers!

There are several ways to encourage referral business. Find out more in the [Online Business Basics manual](#).

- **Other forms of "viral" marketing.** Viral marketing spreads the word about your business through a network made up of your target audience as well as other businesses that complement your own. A good example of viral marketing is the use of free eBooks; they can be given away to spread throughout the 'net, thus helping to build recognition for you and your business.

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## "Wrapping It Up" - a Note from the Editor

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Dear Reader,

I hope you've enjoyed this short series of tips. It's just a very small sample of what's available in the Online Business Basics manual, which includes other practical and usable stuff like:

- Easy ways to create your own free eBook**, even if you don't have a clue about writing. Use it to build your very own network of websites who will gladly promote your business for you!
- Common 'partnerships' you can use to get traffic and sales you may otherwise not have.** Approach another business with a win-win proposal, and you'll *both* benefit!
- Discover a very effective way** to build credibility, draw interested, targeted prospects to your site, and get free advertising in newsletters and websites -- and all for free!
- Save time and money.** How to easily track all your advertising efforts, and interpret the data you gather to make sure your efforts pay off.
- Where to find ezine advertising, dirt-cheap!** Or use a simple but highly effective method to get your URL in other ezines, absolutely *free*.
- Accept credit card orders from your website quickly, easily, and affordably** -- without an expensive merchant account! You can get started in just a few minutes and it won't empty your wallet.
- 162 "Power Words"** you can pick and choose from to help you create provocative ads and sales copy.
- Why should you constantly struggle for more traffic? Discover some practical tips on how to get **more sales with the same traffic**.
- The popular and helpful **Online Business Dictionary**, with an explanation of common terms and phrases you'll hear in the Internet business world.

These are the very same methods I personally used to build a profitable business from scratch and on a shoestring budget. No hype, no “BS” – that’s just not me.

I don’t want to take up any more of your time, so I let me just quickly finish up. I originally started an online business as an experiment... I was skeptical that it would work but still willing to give it a chance because my corporate job was making me miserable. The hard times in the beginning – and heck, the occasional rough spot during these last few years – have been well worth it. Now I do what I love, I have the flexibility to schedule my days the way I want, and I work from the comfort of my home, surrounded by my “pack” of dogs and cats. It’s where I want to be.

You have your own personal reasons for wanting to start an Internet business. Keep them firmly in mind... but remember this: you need to *take action* if you want your dreams to come true. I wish you the very best.

**Angela Wu**

**Online Business Basics**

[Click here for more information on Online Business Basics](#)