



Promoting Yourself Online

DO:

- The Internet is hype central. Do be realistic.
- Do find an ISP and developer/tech people you trust.
- Do understand that you get what you pay for.
- Do have a responsible party for ongoing online activities.
- Do know your customers and their online savvy.
- Do "borrow" ideas.
- Do use the resources that are out there.
- Do understand the Internet.

- Do have a website and e-mail.
- Do get real Internet access.
- Do have a domain name.
- Do have a privacy policy.
- Do create e-mail newsletters.
- Do make your site searchable.
- Do create a content-rich site.
- Do offer questions, FAQs and forums.
- Do provide a service.
- Do provide a mechanism to solicit sales responses.
- Do enable online ordering/fulfillment.

- Do make sure all collateral mentions online presence.
- Do incorporate online property into traditional media.
- Do make your site search-engine friendly, and register with search engines.
- Do allow your customers to attract other customers.
- Do join online groups or forums.
- Do register with industry shopping sites and associations.
- Do promote your site to the industry and online news media.
- Do advertise online.
- Do join or create a web ring.
- Do follow proper "netiquette" when using e-mail to contact customers.

Thinking About the Internet

The Internet is hype central. Do be realistic.
People will tell you that the Net can do everything from make you a millionaire overnight to cause hair regrowth sitting in front of a monitor. Be realistic in your expectations.

Do find an ISP and developer/tech people you trust.

Sometimes, a good warm fuzzy feeling about the people you're dealing with is worth a little more money. You'll need someone knowledgeable and trustworthy to tell you when your ideas are great – or more importantly, if they stink. Remember that every technical person has their biases – ask a bunch of different people for their opinions.

Do understand that you get what you pay for.

There are good deals and bad deals, but overall remember that you're going to pay for quality. Getting a number of quotes from different vendors is your best way of getting an idea of what's reasonable to pay, and protecting yourself from getting taken. Be suspicious of really cheap deals, unless they can reasonably explain to you why it's cheap.

Do have a responsible party for ongoing online activities.

Don't just "do" an Internet presence and then leave it to grow stale and outdated. Make sure someone in your organization specifically has the job of updating your online presence, or outsource it.

Do know your customers and their online savvy.

Know who your customers are demographically, and gauge your Internet presence to their net usage or savviness patterns. Advanced capabilities or flashy graphics and widgets are fine for more computer-savvy users; simple and direct is best for newer/less frequent users. If your audience isn't Internet savvy, be sure to explain what you're doing thoroughly and why it's OK (for things like online ordering). Plan for "Internet-convenience" customers.

Do "borrow" ideas.

There's no need to reinvent the wheel. Look at other people's websites and pick out the things you like so you can incorporate them into your site.

Do use the resources that are out there.

There are plenty of businesses out there with the same questions as you. Hence, there are a number of resources out there to answer those questions. See the resource listing.

Do understand the Internet.

Failure to understand what the Internet is and how it works is a sure route to inadequate planning and unrealistic expectations. Find out what you can and can't do, and have at least a passing understanding of how it works. Remember that the Internet is just a tool like any other, and the results you get are completely dependent on how you use it.

Your Online Presence

Do have a website and e-mail.

In the words of the ancient Roman philosopher Obvius, "duh."

Do get real Internet access.

Dialup isn't good enough for businesses. You need to be online full-time. If your online presence is active, you'll want to be prepared for hits and floods of e-mail. Get ISDN (\$200-\$300), SDSL (\$200 - \$800) or a T1 (\$1400 - \$2000). Multiply your users by 56 kbps and get a line. If nothing else, get

ADSL (\$60).

Do have a domain name.

Avoid all tildes. Don't have a site like *members.xoom.com/~edsbt/* or an e-mail address of *bait41@aol.com*. It was common a few years ago, but now it's a mark of smallness. A domain is cheap, and it's now a required sign of Internet savvy (as well as easier to remember). There are many registrars; if you're looking for a local biz, try Network Solutions (\$70 for two years).

Do have a privacy policy.

People can be a little overly-sensitive about this, but you need to respect that. Make your privacy policy available on your website. Unless you have a great reason, ensure people that their info won't be used elsewhere.

Do create e-mail newsletters.

Ask customers visiting your site if they'd like to subscribe to an e-mail newsletter or bulletin. This creates a community of consumers whom you can regularly send news or special offers to. It's great – it's targeted, and it's ongoing. Good e-mail newsletters like C|Net's News.Com dispatch are in plain e-mail text, have a clear list of contents, and provide brief stories with web addresses to get the "full story."

Do make your site searchable.

It's very simple to make your site searchable for specific words. Make your search function easily visible, and it will invite users to search for things they may not expect to find. Consider building a Sherlock plugin for Macintosh users, too.

Do create a content-rich site.

Gone are the days when the online equivalent of a business card would cut it. Fill your site with information. It gives people a reason to spend more time on your site. Not just the basics (your contact information, products, etc.) – give added value for online users. Maybe it's your company history, or pictures and profiles of your staff, or expanded versions of your sales/promotional materials. Whatever it is, give people something that they can peruse and learn more about you and generate a better sense of "knowing" you.

Do offer questions, FAQs and forums.

Is there a question or questions you get asked all the time? Make sure there's an answer to it on your website. Make your online presence a resource for help and information. Consider creating online forums where customers can ask questions or talk to each other publicly.

Do provide a service.

The most important thing you can do to make your site easier to promote. It's more ambitious, but consider providing an industry service. Create a site for users to learn everything there is to know about bait and tackle. It's easy to plug your site this way while making it of interest to more people and getting more search engine hits. Plus, if your site provides a service, you can use the people who find good info on your site to attract additional customers (see below).

Do provide a mechanism to solicit sales responses.

Be sure to provide a "request a quote" form or a "I'd like more information" form that site viewers can use. Any response is an immediate invitation for a salesperson to call. Some people prefer to have options when they request more information, like a checkbox of their preferred contact method (e-mail, snail mail, telephone).

Do enable online ordering/fulfillment.

The most important thing you can do to add value to your site. Let customers do something online at their convenience that would normally have to be done more inconveniently in person over the phone. Whatever your business, there's something you can do. Buying your product, getting a quote or estimate, scheduling an appointment – whatever it is, give them a reason to go online and come back to your site.

Advertising Your Online Presence

Do make sure all collateral mentions online presence.

Something's wrong if your existing customers don't know you're online. Make sure your promotional materials, business cards, letterhead, etc. all mention your website and e-mail address.

Do incorporate online property into traditional media.

Make sure your yellow page ads, newspaper/magazine ads, TV/radio ads mention your site and why users should go there.

Do make your site search-engine friendly, and register with search engines.

It's simple, and it's the most important thing you can do to promote your site online. Learn about <META> tags and building your site in a search engine and index friendly way (see Resources, below). If you don't want to do it, try a service (see Resources, below).

Do allow your customers to attract other customers.

Use a service like Recommend-It! (see Resources below) or a home-brew script that allows people viewing your site to quickly and easily tell friends about compelling content they find on your site. If it's applicable, consider creating a small graphic for your site that other sites (homepages of your customers, your business partners, etc.) can display as a link to you.

Do join online groups or forums.

There's probably an e-mail list or Usenet group about your industry. Be an active reader and poster. Netiquette generally forbids you to use these forums strictly to plug your business. But those opportunities will present themselves if you're patient. You can also create your own e-mail discussion lists if you'd like (see Resources below).

Do register with industry shopping sites and associations.

Check for industry "comparison shopping" sites. Add your site to their directories, and consider paying for placement if their rates are reasonable. Make sure that any associations you're part of know that you have a site, and see if they can add a link to your site from theirs.

Do promote your site to the industry and online news media. Check for print and online magazines that cover your industry, and promote your site in press releases to these magazines. Even updates to your site can be worth a mention; in some industries, just having a site (especially one that offers a new service) is noteworthy. Also be sure to mention your web address in any press release to traditional media; a news report on you is more valuable if viewers have an easy place to go to find out more about you.

Do advertise online.

Banner ads are pretty cheap. Make sure that you put the same care into them that you do into your traditional media advertisements (make sure you emphasize "why choose us" rather than just "we exist"). Join a program like Link Exchange or buy ads on related sites. Consider sponsoring e-mail lists targeted to your business.

Do join or create a web ring.

Web rings have existed for years among "fan" sites, and there are plenty out there for other topics. If it's applicable or feasible, consider joining one or starting one.

Do follow proper "netiquette" when using e-mail to contact customers.

- Strictly speaking, nobody should get e-mail from you if they haven't asked for it. However, this isn't really possible. The best rule of thumb is that you can send bulk (non-individual) e-mail like promotions or newsletters only to people who have asked for it. Unsolicited e-mail contacts should always be personalized and sent to one individual at a time.
- If you're sending unsolicited e-mail to a potential contact, be sure that the e-mail names them and says why you're contacting them ("I was referred to you by Bob Jones" or "I saw your posting to such-and-such e-mail list saying you were looking for...") up front.
- Send plain-text e-mail, not HTML-format e-mail. HTML format e-mails are difficult to read for users with older e-mail programs, and they waste bandwidth. The only acceptable HTML in an otherwise plain-text e-mail is a hyperlink to your website.
- Never send an attachment with an unsolicited e-mail. It wastes bandwidth, and many people are afraid to open an attachment from any unknown third party. If you want to include easy access to a document (like a spec sheet or sales brochure), provide a link in the e-mail to where it can be viewed online or downloaded.
- Signature files at the bottom of the message should be no more than five lines. Here's mine:

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Jeffrey Carl      Director of Marketing, ServInt Internet Services  
(703) 847-1381 voice          (703) 847-1383 fax  
"Another journalism major enters the workforce..." -Dilbert  
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The smart-aleck quote at the bottom should probably be replaced with a URL to my company's site if I were a salesperson.

- If you're going to use any sort of sarcasm or humor in an e-mail (not advised), be sure to use "emoticons" to signal this. There's a big difference between "You need our service or you'll spontaneously combust and die!" and "You need our service or you'll spontaneously combust and die! ;-)"
- **DON'T USE CAPITAL LETTERS FOR TEXT, EVEN IF YOU REALLY REALLY WANT TO EMPHASIZE SOMETHING! IT'S CONSIDERED "SHOUTING," VERY HARD TO READ AND TENDS TO**

BOTHER PEOPLE! Consider using *asterisks* if you want to emphasize something.

- Make sure that if employees want to post or send something non-business related or controversial, that they use a personal e-mail account rather than a business account.
- Remember that "e-mail is forever." Don't say anything that you'll be embarrassed about later.

DON'T:

X Don't spam.

X Don't underprepare for success.

X Don't expect the world overnight.

X Don't do anything unless you're going to do it right.

X Don't go for form over function.

X Don't get locked into closed technologies or platform/browser specifics.

X Don't think an Internet presence is a one-shot deal.

X Don't forget that the Internet is the future.

X Don't spam.

Follow the "netiquette" guidelines above. Spam is the one unifying factor of online activism, and you'll get the crazies beating on your door, your ISP's door, and the doors of anyone else who will listen. Plus, it will create a negative impression of your business, since the popular conception is that only fly-by-night companies send bulk unsolicited e-mail.

X Don't underprepare for success.

If you're going to promote yourself heavily, be prepared in case it pays off (especially sites which provide a service) and creates a "Slashdot effect." Find web hosting plans where you pay for extra access rather than having a cutoff limit. Prepare for how to deal with excessive e-mail.

X Don't expect the world overnight.

Marketing your business online is just like growing it through traditional media. It takes time for repetition and word-of-mouth to develop. Persistence is crucial, so don't give up if you aren't a sensation overnight (unless you were planning on buying a Super Bowl ad to promote your site).

X Don't do anything unless you're going to do it right.

A well-designed and executed Internet presence can make a one-man operation look like a Fortune 500 company. Conversely, a poor presence can make you look like you're smaller or less sophisticated, or – worst of all to many younger, net-savvy customers, you just "don't get" the Internet. Even the best site looks sloppy if you have "not found" pages or malfunctioning services. Take the time to make sure you're doing a quality job.

X Don't go for form over function.

It's important to have an attractive and professional-looking web presence, but you can go too far. Heavy graphics and animations are nice eye candy, but they introduce compatibility issues and increase download times. You're better off spending the time or money that went into fancy appearance on adding real content or functionality. If anything you're doing for appearance obscures or

gets in the way of customers finding information on your site, then you have a problem.

X Don't get locked into closed technologies or platform/browser specifics.

Make sure that your web designers or IT people don't lock you into exclusive technologies. Sites that require a certain plugin to work, or sites that work "best" with one web browser or another are excluding potential customers. Sites that need to be served from one operating system or with a particular platform-specific program close a number of hosting options for you. Work with open standards and universal compatibility (to a reasonable extent) in mind.

X Don't think an Internet presence is a one-shot deal.

It can't be overstressed how important persistence is. Keep at it, and you'll eventually see returns. Make sure that the person or people you have in charge of updating and expanding your online presence is making use of new tools and resources as they become available. As soon as you put your Internet presence into a closet and lock it away, expect your customers to, too.

X Don't forget that the Internet is the future.

This may all sound like a bunch of "don'ts" and disappointments, but it isn't. It's about making sure that your online presence is ready for today, and that you've made the first steps toward tomorrow. In a few years, broadband access will be more common, and people will be accustomed to video phoning and other applications over the web. Today, you need to tailor your Internet marketing to the lowest common denominator. But don't forget that the future will bring totally new possibilities to the Internet. Making the best use of the tools available today will make you better prepared than your competitors for tomorrow.

RESOURCES:

Site: Search Engine Watch

<http://www.searchenginewatch.com/>

The absolute number one best place to learn about search engines, how they work, and how to customize your site to work well with them and earn the highest rankings. Free. More in-depth material and additional services are available for \$69 per year.

Site: Link Exchange (now part of Microsoft bCentral)

<http://www.bcentral.com/?leindex>

Place your banner ad into a pool that is used by other Link Exchange member sites in your selected categories. In return, you place their ads on your site. Free. Microsoft's bCentral also offers packages that combine search engine submission, banner advertisements and other tools for \$19.95 per month.

Site: SelfPromotion.Com

<http://www.selfpromotion.com/>

Offers the ability to submit your site to a number of search engines automatically, as well as offering a number of search engine-related tutorials. Shareware (the author asks to you contribute "whatever you think this advice has been worth" within four weeks after you create your account).

Site: Add Me!

<http://www.addme.com/>

Will submit your website to 30 search engines, in exchange for your placing an Add Me! banner on your site. Free. Submit-It! used to provide a similar free service as well, but has begun charging \$59 per year for their site registrations since they became part of Microsoft bCentral (<http://submitit.bcentral.com/>). However, Submit-It provides additional services and has no link requirement.

Site: Web Site Garage

<http://websitegarage.netscape.com/>

Provides a "tune-up" check for your website to rate it on download speed, site design, etc. Also provides links to the AOL Affiliate Network and the Affinia ad placement program. Free.

Site: WebRing!

<http://www.webring.org>

A list of existing web rings, plus tools to create a new web ring if you don't see anything that fits. Free.

Site: Web Marketing Today monthly newsletter

<http://www.wilsonweb.com/wmt/>

A monthly newsletter in e-mail and online format, which contains links to a number of recent articles and reviews on methods of promoting your business online. Free. This site also provides a number of for-pay marketing tools.

Site: Web Marketing Info Center

<http://www.wilsonweb.com/webmarket/>

Provides a very thorough list of articles and resources on a wide variety of Internet marketing topics. Free.

Site: WebPromote Online Marketing Resources glossary

<http://www.webpromote.com/tools/glossary.asp>

A glossary of Internet and Internet marketing terms. Somewhat out of date, but still helpful to beginners. Free.

Site: Topica

<http://www.topica.com/>

A list of existing e-mail discussion lists, plus the ability to create your own new lists. Free.

Site: ONElist

<http://www.onelist.com/>

Also provides a list of existing e-mail discussion lists, plus the ability to create your own new lists. Free.

Site: ListBot

<http://www.listbot.com/>

Create your own e-mail discussion lists for free. Also offers expanded list capabilities for \$99 per year.

Site: Recommend It!

<http://www.recommend-it.com/>

Place a Recommend It! button on a page of your site, and a viewer can click it to pop up a window which prompts them to send an automatic e-mail to up to eight friends. Viewers can also win prizes offered by Recommend It! In return, Recommend It! runs an opt-in e-mail list which they send to users who use the button.

Site: Network Solutions domain registration

<http://www.networksolutions.com/>

Register your domain name. It's also probably the place you'll need to go to renew your domain registrations if the first time you registered your domain was more than a year ago.

List: Online Advertising Discussion List

Subscribe at <http://www.o-a.com/>

An e-mail list on the ups and downs of online advertising. Free.

Book: *Poor Richard's Internet Marketing and Promotions: How to Promote Yourself, Your Business, Your Ideas Online* by Peter Kent and Tara Calishain

Practical hints, tips and tricks for promoting businesses online. Highly recommended by readers.

Book: *Customers.Com: How to Create a Profitable Business Strategy for the Internet and Beyond* by Patricia Seybold

More high-level and strategy oriented than Poor Richard's, but still well-reviewed by readers.

Article: Planting Seeds in All the Right Places by Eric R. Ward

<http://www.ahref.com/guides/industry/199805/0519ward.html>

Good tips on publicizing when you launch a new website or make significant changes to an old one.

Site: Directory of Internet Advertising Resources

<http://www.internetadvertising.org/resources/resources.shtml>

Currently under construction, but should be updated soon.

Find more information about ServInt's business services at:

<http://www.servint.net>

Find more information about the ServInt FreeNet at:

<http://www.servintfree.net>