

Effective *Free* Marketing Methods

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Questions about the contents of this book may be directed to techie@adventuretech.us.

Introduction

Marketing is a confusing arena. Most of the people who are telling you how to do it are either trying to scam you, or they are promoting marketing methods that work for larger businesses, but which are not affordable for shoestring startups and microbusinesses.

Our instructions are different. We'll not only tell you how to spot and avoid scams, we'll give you good ideas for alternatives to high priced marketing. The tactics outlined here do work. We've formed our own business around them.

Many take nothing but time to use. Some require paper, ink, gas in the car, or other resources which do cost something, but which you can control the cost of.

This is not the end of the story with marketing. It is merely part of the picture. A successful business will need more than this in the long term.

This IS a good starting place though – especially if you are starting on a skinny shoestring, or if you are trying to breathe some life into a business that doesn't have any significant marketing budget.

What Makes a Good Free Marketing Tactic?

Free marketing tactics have to measure up to the same standards that paid ones do. In other words, they have to accomplish the same end goal, which is, to make you more money.

Marketing accomplishes that goal in a wide variety of ways, and on many different time tables. But the end result has to be one that adds up in dollars and cents.

With free ads, you don't measure cost against return in the same way you do with paid ones, but you still have a cost in time. Therefore, any tactic that WORKS, and gives you a measurable result, may be worth your time. Later on, perhaps only those that give a higher return will be worth it, as your time becomes more valuable.

Nothing is truly free. There is always a cost. So you really need to insure that your marketing methods DO bring in a return that justifies the time.

Since many free marketing tactics are slow though, you may not be able to tell right away whether it IS going to justify itself. If I spend half an hour getting three or four backlinks for my site, I may not see a result for a few weeks. And then I'll see just a little bit. It won't affect my pagerank for another 3-5 months.

But if I get a few hits a month from it, that I can SEE, right away, then I can assume it will go on getting me those few hits a month. It won't be worth the half hour during the first month of returns, or perhaps even the second. But by the fifth or sixth month, I'm firmly in the black with it, and will stay there from then on, because good links are permanent, and they go on earning even after the work has finished.

And that is precisely what makes a good free marketing tactic. One that works hard for you, long after you quit working on IT.

Anything that only lasts an hour or two, or that quits as soon as you quit, is not going to be worth your time. You'll have to keep doing it to keep even a tiny return. Methods that go on working after a one time effort are the best ones because otherwise you won't be able to find enough hours in the day to generate enough business to be worth all the time you are spending promoting.

There are some people who say you cannot market effectively with no money invested. I completely disagree with them, and feel that you CAN market effectively, as long as you are willing to give TIME, until you can give money. And I typically never pay for ADS, I pay for supplies like paper, ink, and software instead.

Even a good free tactic takes a lot of work though. Don't expect it to be easy. You'll have to keep up the work even when you aren't getting anything yet but promises. You'll have to fit in more marketing when it is the last thing you feel like doing. You'll have to make calls when you'd rather be playing. You'll have to take a deep breath and face just one more person who probably isn't interested, but you have to face them anyway because there is a tiny chance that they might just be the one exception that you need to find.

I can promise you from experience though, that when you use the best tactics for your target market, and when you learn to do them well, the results may be slow, but they are immensely powerful. I tried to quit one line of business, but I have customers that won't let me, and I still get referrals because I did such a good job of building loyalty and trust in my clients.

There's Power in them Thar Ads!

How Does Free Marketing Differ from Paid Marketing?

There are a couple of fundamental differences between free marketing and paid marketing, though there is quite a bit of overlap between the two.

The major differences are these:

- 1. Free marketing trades work for money.** You have to do things yourself, and you have to work hard to do the marketing tasks.
- 2. Free marketing also trades time for money.** It works very slowly, and you have to persist and be patient in order to see results.
- 3. The free tactics that really work, build cumulative power.** They give trickles at first, and then more trickles add to the first trickles, and it keeps building and building. SLOW to start, POWERFUL later.
- 4. The learning curve is pretty stiff,** you have to really learn what works and what doesn't.

Paid marketing has the potential to be faster, but many forms still take time to show their real potential.

Pay Per Click is instant, and works like a faucet - pay the bill, the water runs – that is, IF you can get the plumbing working right. Shut off the money, and the traffic stops immediately. It has no residual effect, and no peripheral benefits.

Other paid forms may have a residual effect or peripheral benefits. But most do not have as much power long term for either residual effect OR peripheral benefits as well executed free methods do.

I really like free marketing. In fact, I like it so well, and get such good results from it that for 6 years I didn't even know HOW to market with money! I have tried a few forms of paid advertising, but in reality, most have delivered LESS of a return than good free marketing does. Here is an example:

I paid for Pay Per Click ads, at 5 cents each. I got one site visitor for each click. My site traffic showed exactly the same number of clicks that I was charged for. I did not get ONE SINGLE purchase from a month of using pay per click. I fine tuned my ads, and had the ability to show improvements in where they went in the site and how long they stayed, but the overall visitor quality still remained low.

In that same time, I posted an article to promote the same site. That article has given me only 5% of the traffic that Pay Per Click gave me in a month, BUT, the article is still giving me traffic, and I am not doing anything else to keep getting it. The article is also giving me higher quality traffic, that is actually more interested in what I am selling.

Certainly PPC works for some businesses, otherwise it would not be used. But I could see no reason to use it when it only cost me, and did not return. On the other hand, article marketing shows a consistent return.

I have paid for other ads also, and those ads have consistently performed at a lower rate than ads that I bartered for, or which I got through collaboration.

I've paid for radio ads also. The jury is still out, but so far they are not performing well enough to justify the cost. We've paid for Chamber Membership – and THAT has been well worth the money, bringing in real business. We've paid to mail postcards and brochures, with mixed results – typically good enough to justify the cost and make a profit, but room for improvement.

Most of the money I spend on marketing, is put into paper, gas in the car, hosting space for websites, printer ink, and other supplies.

Most of the money that my clients spend on marketing is spent to pay someone else to do free marketing tactics for them - they are paying only for the time it takes to do them. Because they consider that a permanent trickle is far more valuable than a temporary and expensive flood that may or may not give the results they want.

Elements of Successful Marketing Materials

Marketing materials consist of websites, ads, brochures, business cards, sig lines, and other elements that you use for propagating your marketing message.

Your materials need to look professional, and to present a unified message that reaches out to your target market. They need to have a feel that conveys the same message as the text on them does.

Many business owners will be able to make their own brochures and business cards. Fewer will be able to create a really good website, but some will. Most business owners can write a good signature line, and create short ads that get the point across.

No business owner will be able to do any of those things perfectly right off. All of them take practice. Creating literature and websites though takes not only practice, but a great deal of learning.

Templates can shorten the amount of learning you have to do, but a template is not a good option if you want a personal feel to your materials. A template is a starting place, not an end result. Templates work extremely well when they are used to generate an idea, and then customized to make them work well for the business in question.

I use business card and brochure templates for my own business, and even for clients. But I choose the template based on the layout, and how well I like the way the overall appearance will function for the business in question. I then customize the colors, and add unique images. By the time I'm done, the look and feel is quite different.

It is important that marketing materials be customized for the individual business. One size does NOT fit all. If you have a site designed by someone who does not understand what your business image is, the site will never quite work to bring customers the way it should.

If you use a business card template that 3000 other businesses also use, then your marketing message will lack the unique edge it needs to set your business apart from the rest of your competition.

At the least, change the colors when you can, and add your own images to templates that you use. If you can find other ways to customize them to give the message more impact, then do so, because that can often make the difference between something that is overlooked, and something that is remembered and used.

The message needs to be tightly focused at the people who are most likely to buy your product or service.

If you want to give an effective marketing message, you must identify with your target customer. That means first, you have to HAVE a target customer, and second, you have to learn to think like they do!

- Ever read an ad and got bored in the middle and turned away?
- Ever heard an ad and thought, "How utterly stupid!"?
- Ever heard a description of a "problem" from someone offering a "solution", and thought, "Nope! Not me!"?

When you have a product or information which you feel can help someone, the last thing you want is for them to class you as an oaf who just doesn't get it! And if you don't understand who your target market is, and what they will respond to, that is exactly how they will categorize you.

There are tons of marketing instructional manuals out there about writing effective marketing materials. And to the last, they almost all recommend pushy hype, or what they call "hypnotic messages" for marketing. I don't subscribe to their theories! Because for me, hype turns me off. And when a seller tells me what to feel, or how to react, that just leaves me cold and I go away. It may work for the people they are trying to sell to, but it does not work for people like me, whom I am trying to sell to.

You see, I want to sell to people who like to take charge of their life. Who want practical information to help them do that. People like that don't like to be told what they think or how they feel! They are suspicious of hype, and will run at the sight of it. That is who I specifically choose to market to, so the techniques employed by many sellers are exactly what I want to avoid. I know this about my customers, so I use other strategies.

The marketing method that you use is not a right or wrong one, unless it fails to reach YOUR customer.

You need to know what the most important aspect is for them – whether it be value, price, quality, special features, function, service, caring, etc. Your copy needs to be written to convey that aspect both in the words you SAY, and the feel of what you are saying.

- Impatient customers want you to get to the point.
- Intellectuals want you to prove your point and offer more information as an option.
- Frugal people want to know about VALUE, not just price.
- Cheap people want to know the price, and how much they get for it.
- Business minded people want to know how it will improve their bottom line, specifically, but concisely.
- Academics want to know not just WHAT, but HOW your product can help.

If you don't understand your market, you'll lose their interest, and perhaps earn only their scorn. You can't market anything to anyone without establishing some kind of relationship of trust. The more your message reaches out to their direct needs, wants, and personal style, the more successful you'll be at helping them understand why your product or information has value to them.

Good, effective marketing materials will present an effective message both in the things they say, and in their appearance. It will all coordinate together to make the viewer feel that the message is sincere.

The Stuff that DOESN'T Work

**Bad Marketing isn't a single bad idea.
It is a whole category.**

Good Marketing can be defined as: Putting an effective marketing message in front of people who are interested in what you have to sell.

Bad Marketing includes anything that does not help you make more money.

Bad marketing includes things like Traffic Exchanges, SafeLists, Announcement Lists, Free Classifieds, Trade Associations that have marketing benefits that only reach other members, and anything else that puts your ad in front of other people who are only there to sell, and not to buy.

Ads that increase your site traffic without increasing sales or revenue generation are a waste of your time. Ads that do not put your marketing message in front of people who are genuinely interested in what you have to offer are a waste of time or money.

And in general, marketing consists of three factors:

- A good impression on potential new customers.
- Delivering on your promise to retain existing customers.
- Preserving your good reputation, so that existing customers can assist you in getting more customers.

The argument is never between free or paid marketing. There are a set of free tactics that do work, and that work quite well. There are several types of paid marketing that also work well. It has more to do with the concept, and the effectiveness of the tactic in actual practice than it does with whether you pay or don't pay (though free tactics usually take more time).

Now, I am going to give you a list of things that do not work. And chances are, you aren't going to believe me - not because you are stupid, but because there are other people out there screaming at you to do these things to promote your business. They are going to scream so much louder than I do, and say it so much more frequently than I do, that it will be hard to believe that I am the one telling you the truth, and that what they say DOESN'T work just once or twice.

Let me make this perfectly clear:

People who tell you to do the things that I am telling you NOT to do, have a motive for telling you to do it. And that motive is NOT to help your business grow!

I have NO motive for telling you this, other than to help your business succeed. I gain nothing from any of the recommendations I make. I make money from ads ONLY if people do NOT listen to what I am saying. And sadly, even though I tell a lot of people these things, most of them have to try it and prove to themselves that I was in fact being straight with them.

Here is a listing of a dozen free tactics that do NOT work - pay attention to what makes them not work, and you'll be able to spot the paid ones that won't work too!

- Free Classifieds/FFA Submitting – Free Classified sites and Free For All Link sites won't do you any good. Your information won't stay there long enough to benefit you, nobody who wants what you have is looking for it there, and search engines won't pick up your link there. You will get lots of spam from it though. **Free directories are a different thing, and have a real human approving all the listings, so they are not included in this category.**
- Traffic Exchanges – If you are madly clicking away on someone else's site, just so you can rack up points to get someone else to click on your site, what makes you think anyone clicking on your link wants what you have? Traffic and income are not the same thing. These do NOT help your search engine rank, and they do not help you get customers or ad clickthroughs, so they are a waste of time that you could spend doing something that does work.
- List Building Programs – In order to benefit from these, you have to promote the list. If you can do that

successfully, you can promote your list directly, and more successfully. Prospects from these programs are also not high quality prospects because they are there to SELL, not to buy.

- Safelists – Same issue as traffic exchanges. People are there to SELL, not to buy. Your email gets deleted without being read, and you wasted your time writing it and sending it, and you wasted all that time you have to spend emptying your inbox. Also called Announcement Lists, Ad Lists, and Marketing Lists.
- Massive Link Trades – Links are only valuable if they are from good quality sites with something in common with your site. Trade with the wrong sites, and it can get your site banned if that site has been banned. Low pagerank is not a problem... Bad quality sites are.
- Repeat Search Engine Submits – Once your site has been submitted, it gets rechecked by the search engines on a regular basis. Resubmitting is a waste of time, and can get you banned by the search engines for spamming them.
- Submit All Pages to Search Engine – Submit JUST the home page. Any more than that is a waste of your time, and can be seen as spamming the search engines. The search engines will follow the links from your home page to all the other pages in your site.
- SEO Black Hat Tactics – Anything you do to trick the search engines into giving you inaccurate or undeserved rankings is considered black hat. It will get you banned, and that would not help you get traffic at all!
- Advertising on Forums – Participating in forums is a GOOD marketing tactic. Spamming them is bad. You have to be a real person, offer helpful information, and do more than just post an ad. Ads are forbidden on some forums – follow the rules. Most forums allow a signature link though, and if people like you, and think you have good sense and intelligence, they'll click the link.
- **Fast, Free Solutions – Anything advertised as “fast and free” is a scam. No exceptions, no equivocation. If its free, its slow (may be very powerful, but takes time to grow). If its fast, its costly.**
- MiniSites in Free Webspace – Some people say you can build a mini-site and stick it in free space, and link it back to your main site to get more traffic. Forget it. Search engines now check site ownership, and all you did is give yourself more things to promote, since new websites have no linking power for pagerank. Building all those sites is time consuming. In the time it takes for you to register an account with a free hosting service, you can post two high quality links to niche directories. In the time it takes to build one mini-site completely, you can get 10 high quality links and add a couple of pages of good quality content to your main site. Why waste your time getting fragmented? Focus on the real issue, which is promoting your site and updating it.

There are lots of other supposed shortcuts that take more time also. I hate seeing people get discouraged because they thought it did not work, when they were just doing the wrong things!

So, stick to the stuff that is proven to work - there is PLENTY of good stuff to try. It isn't fast, but boy does it work in the long term! Just keep persistently doing it, and watch for slow growth trends. Since good tactics have a cumulative effect, once it STARTS growing, it usually increases the pace as you keep doing more of it.

The Essential Assessment

It is impossible to tell which marketing is good marketing, and which marketing is ineffective for your business without regular assessment and adjustment.

You can make intelligent judgments ahead of time, about whether or not a marketing tactic is LIKELY to work, based on the criteria that it has to send an effective message to people who want that message, but you cannot know for certain which messages are effective, or which messages are MOST effective, or sometimes even where the highest concentrations of interested people are, without some means of measuring results.

Let me make it very clear, that most good marketing takes time to see solid results. For some kinds of free (and some kinds of paid) marketing, it can take 3-4 months to get an initial response. With other kinds, it can take that long to spot a trend, and with others, it takes that long to fine tune a campaign enough to know whether it CAN ever yield the results you want.

Assessment has two parts:

1. Measuring results. You do this by tracking responses, measuring financial returns, and by seeing where your customers are coming from with whatever degree of accuracy you can afford. Sometimes we cannot afford the most accurate methods, so we make educated guesses based on the available information, and then we see if a change gives us the result we'd expect if our conclusion is right.

2. Making choices for changes, based on our interpretation of the results. Sometimes we hold firm, sometimes we fine tune, sometimes we dump it entirely and go in another direction.

It can get complicated when we are running several marketing methods at a time. How can we know if increased traffic comes from article marketing, or from SEO? We can't really, because article marketing produces increased pagerank, which results in indirect increases in search engine traffic, and SEO also produces increases in search engine traffic. But we can make educated guesses.

The whole point though, is that we pay attention, as much as we can, to what our marketing gets us. I have enough sites, I can test marketing methods one at a time. I can use just cross linking with site A, just article marketing with site B, and just forum posts with site C. Most people cannot do that, but they CAN watch for gradual improvements in numbers, about two to eight weeks after article marketing, about two to four weeks after cross linking, and within a day of forum postings (there will be a second response if the forum links are counted by the search engines, but it will be minor, and it will follow several weeks later)..

With any of these though, ONE article will bring only small results. Cross linking with ONE site won't make a huge difference. Forum posts will give just trickles unless you do a lot.

The real power ISN'T from one of them. It is from doing that method repeatedly. After about six article posts (if they are good articles), you'll definitely see something within a couple of months. The other methods are the same - slow, and building rather than sudden and unmistakable.

Once you are certain what does work, then follow the old business rule:

Do more of what works, less of what doesn't.

In order to follow it though, you have to first accurately pinpoint what IS working.

The Pros and Cons of Do it Yourself Marketing

Most people who do free marketing do it because they simply cannot afford more expensive methods. Many though, do it because there are some VERY effective methods that should be done even if money is plentiful. In fact, many of these tactics are so effective that business owners will pay someone else to have them done, as it is still a more effective use of their money than some other paid forms.

The major issue here is one of time. Free marketing methods take time in two ways:

They take work, which YOU have to do (or which you have to pay for), and that work takes a lot of time.

They are slow to work. They work with awesome power, but it takes time to build.

So, that means if you decide to do your own marketing without paying for anything other than equipment and supplies (internet connection, computer upkeep, paper, etc), then you must be willing to work very hard, for a very long time.

The other thing about doing it yourself is that you have to LEARN. There are tactics that are a waste of your time, and some that can actually harm your business. There are other solid, tried and true, and highly effective tactics, and you have to learn to know the difference, and how to do the good ones right.

Nearly every tactic has a specific set of rules. Do it wrong, it will backfire. Do it right, it will slowly grow into something awesome.

Doing your marketing yourself means you have to learn how to do those right, and you also have to learn the rules of effective marketing in general.

You can use the most effective method in the world, and if your marketing message is wrong for your target market, it will still fail. So you have to learn how to word things, and how to produce an effective message.

These are things many business owners can learn. It is certain though, that you will have many moments of frustration, and quite a bit of discouragement before you get there. I don't know any small business owners who have not had to slog through a great deal of marketing that they did not feel like doing, during a time when they thought it would not work well enough to bring enough long term. As they persevered though, they DID triumph, and with dedication, it did eventually pay off.

You have to spend about half of your business time marketing during the first three to six months. After that, you can only slack a bit IF you are getting good results. You'll also get more efficient at marketing, so it gets done faster.

Free marketing tactics that work, and that startup owners can learn to do, are one of the ways in which a determined person can get started with a business, even if they have no real cash to invest.

But it only happens if they substitute work for cash, and determination for assistance.

Article Marketing

If you decide to put all your eggs in one basket, and focus on just ONE marketing tactic, then this is the one. It has all the advantages of just about every other kind of marketing, and it is 100% honorable and effective when you do it right.

Article Marketing is just about my favorite type of online marketing. It is a total winner when you do it right, there is no down side. Of course, it is also one of the harder ones to learn to do right, because it requires good writing skills. But it has such power, that developing good writing skills is well worth the effort!

It works like this:

You select a topic that relates to the product or service you are offering through the website you wish to promote.

Write an article that meets certain criteria to help it do the job right. That means NEVER EVER using the article as an ad!

Add a signature line that has your URL and a short background on you. This is the ONLY place you can advertise.

Post the article to article directories, where other people are able to read it, and reprint it (with the signature line) if they choose.

Article marketing is very powerful, because it reaches beyond your own sphere of influence, and into other people's spheres of influence. It also gives something to your prospective customers, in a way that helps them feel they can trust you to deliver on what you promise later.

Because it offers instructions and a bit of personality, it starts the relationship marketing process for you. It increases credibility, and markets indirectly. It is viral, and spreads itself if you give good value that other people want to share with their own site visitors. It accomplishes not just one objective, but a whole range of them.

The concept is incredibly simple, and very powerful. It is also 100% free if you can do the work yourself. Some people cannot, and for them, it is still worth paying someone else \$50 or so for a high quality article that targets their business topics in an effective way, because they will certainly get more for their \$50 than they would if they spent it on Pay Per Click or any other "pay per visitor" type marketing.

Article marketing is considered to be a "permanent and free" marketing method. Permanent online does not mean forever, but it means that it goes on working for you, for years after you made a single effort.

There is a reason why this is our favorite type of online marketing.

Because it works!

The whole process is FAR more detailed than I can possibly explain on this one simple page, so I'll refer you to my site that deals just with that topic, at <http://www.articlemarketingmagic.com/>

It is well worth either taking the time to learn to do it well, or paying someone else to do a quality job for you, because articles end up benefiting your business in more ways than just posting them on article directories.

Once you have a good quality article that you hold the copyrights to, you can use it for a wide range of marketing and product creation objectives. Content is king on the 'net. Articles are content. With them, you can carve out your own little kingdom!

Directory Listings

Do not confuse Directory Listings with Free Classified listings... They are NOT the same thing!

Directories are listings of websites which have been screened by a real person before the listing goes live.

Very often, directories are topical - classed as Niche Directories, a wide variety of web directories are confined to listing sites within a narrow topic range. They may be broad based - such as a Culinary Directory that lists everything having to do with cooking and food, to a specific niche topic such as Culinary Equipment, or a specific Ethnic Cooking only.

Other directories are general directories, which are categorized. Efficiency of categories varies widely, and it can be difficult to find an appropriate category for some listings.

There are two basic categories of directories as far as marketing value goes:

1. Static Link directories. These directories give you a static link in your listing, and this will usually give you Search Engine Pagerank benefits. A static link means a plain HTML hyperlink that does not change. Some directories that use static links will use a "no follow" tag, which cancels out pagerank benefits. In a few cases, they will use both a dynamic link and a static link - the dynamic link in the title of the listing, and a static link below it. This counts as a static link, because the search engines DO see the static link. These are increasingly rare.

2. Dynamic Link directories. These directories produce a redirected link. This type of link is used frequently to track clicks on the links, but the end result for you is that they ONLY benefit you from those clicks. They have no search engine pagerank benefits. This is not a reason NOT to list with them, but it does mean they will have lower value.

Normally when you list a site with a directory, you will have to either use a form to select the category and enter the information, or, with many "human reviewed" directories, you have to go in and search out the category you want, then use a link on that page to submit your site. This means that submitting to some directories can be time consuming.

Finding directories also takes some time. The cool thing is though, once you find a directory in the niche you are looking for, it is usually very quick to find others. Many times, the directories will have listings within their pages that point you to other directories.

Some directories will require a reciprocal link. Now, be careful with this one! If you trade links with them, then you'll get a little lower pagerank benefit from the site. That is ok when the site has a very high pagerank and you can still benefit from it. But if the directory gives you a dynamic link that does not help your pagerank, and they want you to put a static backlink on your site for them (their software may not detect any other kind as being valid), then you may end up on the losing end of the trade, unless your link on their site brings significant traffic.

Before you trade links with anyone, check their pagerank - it need not be high! You just need to make sure they have not been banned. If they have been banned, do NOT place a link to them on your site! More on this in the Link Exchange section.

Many times, you will submit a site, and you'll not know when it will be approved or denied. If it is denied, you may not be notified. So you very often have to just submit, move on, and hope. You'll not have the time to check back on them all!

Directory links can be time consuming to get, and over time, many other websites will pick up your link anyway. But if you are struggling to get exposure on a tight budget, then directory links can be an important part of getting good quality links.

Signature Lines and Business Cards

Two of the most powerful low cost/free ad options are business cards and signature lines. A signature line is the online equivalent to a business card, and you should carry it everywhere!

Signature lines are simpler than business cards. You can set up your email program to automatically insert a signature line into any email you compose. It should be short, and concise, containing your name, business name, URL, and just a simple description. A signature line should use one or two keywords, but like any good advertising, it should not be full of hype, and it should deliver an effective message.

Your friends and family probably won't buy from you, but they should have no doubt as to what it is that you do for a living. They won't mind seeing it in print, and may even pass it on. The power of a signature line is more than what we think, because emails get forwarded, sometimes to lists of people. Occasionally that signature line goes too.

Like a business card, it validates your business. It is an expected thing in corresponding with potential clients or customers.

You can use a signature line in other ways. When you participate in online forums, or post to a group, just leave your signature line. If you post to a guestbook or other comment area, leave your URL if you have the chance. It will not only give you some direct exposure, it will also help you with link building since your URL will be archived in the pages that the search engines index.

Now, do NOT go around spamming guestbooks or forums! That is NOT what I am recommending! I am merely suggesting that you leave your URL or signature line wherever you normally go, doing what you normally do. Certainly those who come in contact with you should know what you do! And when you are really excited about your business, it becomes part of who you are, so there is no reason why you should not include it with your name. I had long underestimated the power of this, but when I stopped being afraid to leave my URL wherever I went, it was surprising how many clicks came in from that. Not only do I get clicks from it, but about half of my clients come from forums I am on, or because they were referred by someone who "knows" me from one of the forums. (You can see in your tracking that some clicks come through mail clients, or through forum URLs.)

Signature lines can be attached to articles that you write, and serve as a form of viral marketing. They can reach out beyond your normal sphere of influence and touch people you would not normally affect.

Business cards should be used offline in the way sig lines are used online – drop them whenever someone may be interested.

The purpose of signature lines and business cards is not to hard sell. They are a way of using normally established connections and relationships to build business connections from. People are more likely to do business with someone they feel they know. If they have met you, they'll more likely check out your website if you make it convenient for them to do so. If they feel they know you, as many people do from online conversations, then they are more likely to feel they can trust you.

It is just a way of saying, "Oh, and by the way, in case you are interested, this is what I do."

Business cards cost something to print, whether you purchase them or print them yourself, so they are not really a free marketing method. They are still far lower in cost than many other things though, and since you can print them on demand if you make them yourself, you can contain the cost so it does not require a bunch at once.

Sig lines are totally free. They are also very powerful both directly, and indirectly. For someone trying to promote a business on the cheap, there simply is no excuse for not using a signature line!

Event Participation

The key here is in the word "participation". If you do an online or offline event correctly, you can do a great deal to help to establish a reputation that leads to sales and contacts later.

I think the most effective thing I ever did in the small town I am in is to participate in a local craft and business fair. I set up the crocheted doilies and banana bread on one end of the table, and the computers and business cards on the other end. My kids sold banana bread and crochets, and I talked to people about my computer and website design business.

Ever after, people in town associated me with computers. Even if they had not actually talked to me, they remembered me with that computer at that event. When they needed a computer service, they thought of me. In fact, that association was so powerful that even five years later, someone will still call me out of the blue here, and ask me if I still fix computers (I do only for local people now), because they remembered me there.

Events are a great way to get your face and a quick business message in front of a large number of people at one time. You can reach potentially thousands from a single effort. That is pretty amazing. And every single person who approaches your table does so because of interest.

Online events are not quite so powerful, but they still have a lot of ability to put your face, your name, and a message in front of people in a way that associates them together in their minds.

You can gain one of two things from an event:

1. Sales. Sometimes we go to an event to sell things. We set up a booth and a cash register and cash in on impulse buys. This works well for a range of businesses.

2. Exposure. For service or large item retailers, you rarely make a sale at an event. You make contacts instead. You build relationships and create a presence. It is just as powerful as making sales on the spot, even though you may not see those results for a long time. The full effects of an event for a service business may occur over years.

Go prepared. If you have products, you need to have enough, but not so much that you get stuck with a bunch of unsold stuff. If you have a service business, go with plenty of brochures, business cards, and other handouts.

One of the keys to successful event participation is to give them something to remember you by. If all you can afford is a business card, then hand those out. If you can afford to hand out other kinds of bits, then do so. Events are a good place to hand out pens, keychains, magnets, etc. Save the more pricey stuff though for places where there are likely to be people who are really interested in your service. Don't hand them out to every kid who goes by looking for something cool to take home, unless your target market is kids!

Shake hands, be friendly and not pushy. Be a real person. Find a way to connect with the people who come to your booth. Enjoy the interaction, and people are more likely to respond to you.

Leave them with a good memory if you can, and with something tangible. If you manage that, you'll reap the benefits for years beyond what you think they'll ever remember.

Link Exchanges

Link Exchanges were considered hot news a year or so ago. The latest greatest thing, and an easy way to get better search engine ranks. Unfortunately, the spammers took advantage of them, as they do with all things, and killed a lot of the power of link exchanges. Link exchanges may be referred to as link trades, or reciprocal linking.

Link exchanges operate on a couple of different principles. Some are sites that offer "link exchange services", which are usually just a listing of businesses that will trade links. I have never received any offers of trades from these that were not spam.

You can place a page on your site that offers link exchanges. A few of our sites have one. These will get you a few legit trades, and a lot of scummy offers. It has been worth it to me for the few golden trades that have come in through these, but I don't put them on all of my sites.

Some people will go hunting link trades. I don't. Offers to trade links that come in without having been asked for, will usually be treated as spam. When I have a link exchange page on my sites, I give instructions that they have to email me, with a specific phrase in the title. If that is missing, I know they are most likely using automated software to send the request, and that there is not likely to be a real person at the end of the email.

I participate in some business networking forums, and I encounter people there that I enjoy association with. When they have a website that is topically related to one of mine, that would be a good trade, then I'll offer privately to trade links with them. If their site has a better pagerank than mine, I'll put links on more than one of my sites in trade.

The current dogma is that relevant link trades are better than non-relevant. Actually, search engines do a bad job of telling the difference (about a 50% error rate, in either direction). People, on the other hand, do a very good job of telling the difference, so relevant links are always better. A Links page full of all kinds of garbage makes your site look tacky.

Make sure you screen any sites you link to. Your link on their site won't hurt you, but their link on your site will! Only link to good quality sites that have not been banned.

Low pagerank won't hurt you. Today's pagerank 0 can be tomorrow's pagerank 4. Several of my sites went immediately from pagerank 0, to pagerank 4 the first time they showed up with a pagerank.

High pagerank helps you. Some sources will insist that your links on sites with lower pagerank will hurt your rank, but that is utter nonsense. If that were the case, there would BE no high rank sites, because for a pagerank 10, EVERYONE that links to them is lower pagerank! The fact is that high pagerank helps, and lower pagerank helps too. Not as much, but it does help, regardless of what your pagerank is.

The other philosophy that is stupid is that links that come off of your site lower your pagerank. That is also a misinterpretation. The misunderstanding comes from the statement that "when your site is linked from a high ranking page, that page 'gives' you a little of their pagerank, hence the value of a link on a high pagerank site is more than on a low pagerank site", and the statement that the more links on a page the less value is passed on to each one. So someone got the idea that outbound links cause you do "lose" pagerank like leaky plumbing. This is also nonsense. If it were true, then Directories would have no pagerank at all! In fact, search engines do consider what kinds of links you have coming off your pages, and they expect to see a variety of links to other sites. That is, after all, normal linking behavior. You won't be penalized for linking to other sites, unless those sites are trashy or banned.

People who have come up with those ideas have obviously not logically thought about the process! Because if you do think about what they are saying, it is obvious that such a ridiculous policy could not possibly be maintained by any search engine!

So, watch for good link trade opportunities, but don't waste your time mass emailing for them. Nobody will read those emails. If you find link trade invites on reputable sites, go ahead and email or trade according to their instructions. Do not be surprised though if automated link trade forms don't work - every single one I have ever used has failed to recognize a static HTML link on a simple HTML page.

I get a reasonable amount of traffic from links on the sites of others, plus I get a better pagerank, therefore better search engine traffic as a result as well. I am conservative about trading, and I look for relevant links only.

Ad Swaps

A lot of small sites either offer advertising, or their owners are open to ad swaps. The same rules hold here as with link exchanges though, and if you go out looking for them, you'll not have much success.

In the course of business networking, you'll run across people that you get along with, and who have a website that will compliment yours. Keep your eyes open for the opportunity for ad swaps within the course of normal associations with people. You'd be surprised how many you can find, I run into quite a few every week. But I don't spend time hunting them down.

Most established websites get lots of "link exchange" spam. And I do mean a LOT. If you offer ad swaps, you'll get a lot of trash offers too. The sad fact is that most people who approach you for ad trades who do not already know you will have trashy sites. Only 1 in a couple hundred will be legit.

This means that when you are on the receiving end of ad swap requests from strangers, you tend to throw them out. So if you send out requests to people YOU don't know, they will treat them as spam also. People are pretty reluctant to even swap ads with someone with whom they do not have some kind of established relationship.

So go back to forum participation, trade association memberships, networking groups, etc, to get ad swaps. And then just pay attention to the people around you, and when you stumble on someone with a quality site that compliments yours, make an offer after you have some kind of basic relationship established.

It comes as a secondary result of forming relationships FIRST. This is true of a LOT of free marketing tactics, and the real benefits don't even show up until you have really started to develop a reputation within a forum or group.

You can trade content page links, banner ads, text ads, or buttons. You can trade based on page volume, or just trust and swap. Just keep an eye out for swaps that help you and your trading partner both.

Make sure you never trade unless you have checked out the other site. Don't just swap and stick their link on your site, because if their site is banned, or using tactics that will get it banned, then it will hurt YOUR site to have their link on it. Use a Google Ban tool online to check it, but beware, brand new sites won't be indexed in Google yet, and will show up the same as if they are banned.

Look for Black Hat Seo on the site. Check for obvious things like repeated and badly used keywords, pull up the source code if you think you can understand enough of it to see if they are using bad alt tags or metatags, and drag your cursor over the page to check for hidden text. Look at the bottom of the page, for any tiny links that go to sites that you feel are not good quality (sometimes site owners hide disreputable links at the bottom of the page). Normally you can check the home page and one random interior page and get a good feel for the site, but you'll also want to check the Links or Resources page if they have one, and see what kind of sites they are linking to..

Make sure the site has a good, high quality feel about it, with solid informational or product content. You can usually get a good feel for it fairly quickly.

Use caution when you swap ads, and develop relationships first.

Bartering

It's not exactly free, but it won't cost you money either if you do it smart. It's different than a link exchange or ad swap too, because it involves trading a product or service for advertising.

I design websites. I'll give my clients a \$100 discount if they let me put a link box on their site. I make it as painless as possible for them, and in return, I get good promotional returns.

I'll often swap SEO, website, or graphic design services for ad placements. When someone asks me for advice, and I give it freely, they'll often express a wish to compensate me (even when they cannot afford it). I'll ask them to give me a backlink - since it is a one way link, it is worth the time it took me to kindly answer their questions.

I've had offers of all kinds of barter for web services. I traded some services on a website for 3 new windows in my house, and a new driver side window in my car. One of these days I'll put together a proposal for a car dealership, and go get me a van, or for an RV dealership, and get our family the used RV trailer we have wanted for years.

The key to bartering is that you find someone who has what you want, who also NEEDS what you have. Get that, and you're in business.

A LOT of people are willing to trade for advertising. And it is also WORTH your time to trade a small service or product in exchange for a permanent link, because that link, while it is just a drop in the bucket, will go on working for you for a long time. I have links on other people's sites that I have bartered for, which are bringing me steady traffic every month. A combination of three of them brings me a significant percentage of my overall traffic. Those links have also been responsible for more actual sales than many other referral sources also, because the sites they were on had a strong customer loyalty, so the link was tantamount to a good recommendation from a trusted source.

Explore your options, and keep an open mind. Be willing to give generously of your time, especially when you are starting out and time is all you've got, and just ask for a link in return. You'll be surprised how fast those links add up, and the eventual power that they have!

Cross Linking

Another hot and controversial tactic...

Cross linking refers to interlinking your own sites when you own more than one. An example of cross linking is on the right hand side of any of my websites.

The controversy comes in when it comes to Search Engine Ranking. Do the search engines see cross linking as a subversive tactic, or do they ignore the links, or do they give importance to them?

Logically, they would be pure idiots to penalize for cross linking sites. Because ANY site owner is going to logically promote their own sites, ESPECIALLY if they have relevant topics! To not do so would be very foolish. When you have a basis for marketing leverage, you have to use it. I get a LOT of traffic to my sites that comes in from other sites that I own. I'd be stupid to not want to keep getting that traffic.

Now, there is legitimate cross linking, and cross linking that can have a negative affect. If you create doorway pages whose sole purpose is to promote the same sites over and over, then THAT is considered black hat SEO. Don't do it.

If you cross link very aggressively, with multiple references to the same page over and over on your sites, then that is also considered to be low and borderline unethical - besides which it will seriously interfere with the overall quality of your site. Don't do it.

I have over 35 sites now. I link anywhere from 5-15 to any given site. That is because I have sites on parenting, health and nutrition, and on business, marketing, website design, and other topics, not all of which are related. I list only those sites which are relevant - understand though, that search engines are NOT good at judging relevancy, in fact they are very BAD at it. So just cross link when it enhances the value of the site you are building. For our sites, the resources listed in the sidebar have value to the visitors of the site. And that is how cross linking should work.

Cross linking can help you as a valid marketing tactic. But it should always be used in a way that helps your site visitor as much as it helps you, if not more. If the links are obnoxious, get rid of them or move them. If the links are not of interest to your audience, don't put them in. If you have a general site link in a sidebar or other standard "every page" resource listing, then do not link to the home page for that site in your content - if it is appropriate and needed to make reference to a resource in that site, then link directly to the page that has that specific item or topic, not to the home page.

I have heard people say, "A friend of mine cross linked their sites and was banned by Google." The fact is, that improper cross linking might in fact cause you to be banned, but if your site is banned, it is more likely due to other factors. We have no idea of what else the "friend" was doing on their site that might have got them banned.

I do have some statistical evidence for the power of cross linking though. Back when I owned only a dozen domains, I cross linked every single one. As I branched out more, the sidebar got really cluttered, so I started weeding out the irrelevant links, and interlinking only the sites that related to one another. Within one week of doing that, I saw two dramatic effects:

1. My referral traffic dropped. I get a certain percentage of my traffic from my own sites, and that was significantly changed.
2. My search engine traffic dropped by an equal percentage. This happened within two weeks of making the changes.

The cumulative effect was a drop in overall site traffic of about 25%. I saw a corresponding drop in my AdSense income (that hurt!). And the pagerank on a few of the sites dropped over the long term (the ones that did not have growing numbers of relevant sites to boost the linking back up). Over the next few months though, as the sites continued to grow, and as I continued to add more sites, the traffic rebounded.

As with all tactics, use it in a reasonable and logical manner. Do not think that it is a tactic for manipulating search engines because it is not. It is just one more thing you do in a way that makes sense for the site you are building, because once you HAVE traffic to a site, it is reasonable to use that traffic to encourage traffic to a new site. Your reputation SHOULD be able to transfer from one thing you own to another, and search engines would,

again, be stupid to penalize for that, because, after all, when Microsoft or Yahoo slaps their name on a new site, and cross links it with their old one, do they penalize for THAT? No, because those two companies have a reputation that they rightly use. Smaller businesses and bigger businesses need to be held to the same standards.

Do what is logical. You'll never be able to figure out what the search engines do or do not like, so apply some common sense and go with it. Use your own judgment about where to draw the line, and keep your site quality and visitor satisfaction at the top of the list.

Cooperation - Collaborations and Joint Ventures

I really hate the term "Joint Venture" sometimes, because it has become a catch phrase for something quite a bit less than what it really is. I have chosen to use the words "collaboration", and "cooperation", because it encompasses a lot more than just a single event or narrowly defined class of cooperation.

The whole point is, that you can cooperate with your associates, and even with your competitors. Some people are paranoid of cooperating with competitors, but when you do, you end up with a benefit to BOTH of you, instead of harming your business as you fear. It works especially well if you are each targeting a slightly different niche, or if you have related but not directly competitive products, but even direct competitors can cooperate to succeed. Any trade show is exactly that - everyone groups together to make a bigger splash than they could make on their own.

To make them work, you have to think outside the "internet marketing" box. It is not all about swapping email lists, nor is it all about giving away freebies. The truly effective joint ventures go way beyond that, and have far more power than just getting subscribers from a bunch of people who are used to ignoring emails and just want the freebies.

All a joint venture is, really, is two people agreeing to cooperate for mutual benefit. It can be very small, or it can be very large. In its infancy, it is a link exchange or ad trade. All growned up, it is an event, product launch, marketing plan, project collaboration, etc.

Joint ventures depend on relationships. You cannot approach someone for a collaboration that involves trust (even if it just means trusting you to follow through with your part of the work) unless they know something about how you work, communicate, and whether or not they feel they can depend on you. And that means finding ways to associate with others within your marketing arena.

Collaborations and Joint Ventures can come in any flavor, and are limited only by your creativity. Some types of collaborations include:

- eBooks - You can join with others, either by cooperating as co-authors, or by requesting contributions from other authors in return for giving them credit. The eBook can be sold, or given away for viral marketing purposes.
- Ad Trades - These can be small, or large, and can take place in a wide variety of mediums.
- Projects - Development of products, launch of products, etc.
- Websites - You can collaborate with someone else to build a joint website.
- Events - Online or offline events are usually organized by one or more business people, and then other businesses are solicited to cooperate and participate. This is a joint venture on a large scale, and with several levels of participation.

In order to spot opportunities, you have to get out there and get to know people. Once you do that, you'll start getting an idea of people with whom you can cooperate successfully, communicate with well, and work together with for mutual benefit.

Search Engine Registration

You certainly want to get your site indexed with the major search engines, but you really don't even have to register it to get it indexed!

A lot of emphasis is placed on registering a website with the search engines. Companies that offer automatic registration make it sound as though this is the be all and end all of getting traffic to your site.

So I suppose you'd be surprised to hear me say that registering a site with the search engines is NOT the most important thing you can do to get website traffic! But its true.

If you register a site, but do not link it into any other quality sites, your traffic will stop at about 200 hits a month, and just get stuck there.

If you link your site into other sites, **EVEN IF YOU DON'T REGISTER IT**, you'll get traffic that will gradually grow over time, way past what it would with search engine registration. The reason for this is found in the way in which search engines index sites, which I'll explain a little further down.

The best strategy, of course, is to do both, which gets you the most permanent traffic in the fastest way. I only point out this rule so that you understand that while registering with the search engines is a step you don't really want to leave out, it is NOT the most important one, and it is not a solution in itself.

Registering a site with the search engines consists of two sets of tasks:

1. You can autosubmit to certain search engines and directories. You can choose any system or program to do that, there is not a lot of difference between them, because there are big search engines which they all submit to, then tons of tiny ones which don't make a huge difference whether you submit to them or not. All of them submit to the big ones, the differences lie in how many, and which, of the ones that don't matter.
2. You **MUST** submit your site to specific search engines manually. They simply do not allow auto-submissions. So systems that promise superior performance through auto-submitting simply cannot deliver on their promise. To do the job right, you **HAVE** to manually submit to certain search engines and directories.

I use SelfPromotion.com as my first line tool for submitting. The next one I'd recommend would be Submit-It, but if you are going to use that, just go to MSN B-Central and get the one year listing for your website instead, which includes a Submit-It subscription also. Submit-It is nice for startups because it does offer some optimization tools.

If you do not get anything else done, you'll want to register with "the Big Three". That is, Google, Yahoo, and MSN. Google allows auto-submissions, but you currently have to manually submit to Yahoo and MSN. And all three of those will send you significant traffic over time if you get them done, so don't miss out on one.

It pays to take the time to work your way through the submission process at SelfPromotion.com, because some of the small sites will index you faster. Others will pick you up later from other search engines.

There is controversy over whether to submit regularly or not, and whether to submit multiple pages. Here is my own personal rule about how often to submit, how much to submit, and why.

I submit my sites to the search engines no more than once a year. Some of them not even that often after the initial submission. This is because if you change your content regularly, then the major search engines will re-index you anyway.

The only sites that need to be resubmitted are those that almost never change, and even then they do not need to be submitted more than once every six months or so. You see, the only reason to resubmit is to get the search engines to update changes. And if you have no changes, then resubmitting does not help.

If you have a neglected site that you make major changes to, then resubmitting can help, especially if you intend to go on making regular changes.

As far as submitting individual pages, I feel this is also generally a waste of time. However, if you have a site that needs to get rapid traffic to specific interior pages, then submitting just those pages can help, OR, if you have a site that has sub-sections in it that need to be registered in their own right. Usually though, over time, the search engines will spider deeper and deeper into your site and index those pages anyway. This happens most often within 3-6 months. And since your home page is indexed anyway, if you don't have special features that need traffic in their own right, then submitting individual pages usually is not necessary. I just feel that there are more effective uses of my time that will get more results than this.

If you are building multiple sites and are interested in getting things done fast, then you can just register each new domain with the search engines, and then go on to building another while you let the search engines do their job. I cannot see any difference in time to indexing through doing this, than if I register them specifically. If you have stats tracking on your web host, you can watch the progress of the indexing process. You'll see the big search engines spider one to five pages, then ten to twenty, then the whole site, over a few months.

Be aware that it takes anywhere from 24 hours to 8 months for your site to be included fully in the search engine listings that you submit to. Some will spider your site and include it right away. Others will spider the site and then review it by a real person. Some will require that you submit it and then they will choose the category when they get around to it. Google seems to index you, then bury your site at the bottom for six to eight months. So it still may take considerable time to get results after registering it.

Registering your site is not the be all and end all of internet marketing. It is really just the first step. It is the one that you make when your site is ready to be viewed, with content on each page, and for many sites, it is sort of the equivalent of a "grand opening", though there is no party, and no immediate response.

Search Engine Optimization

SEO is an abbreviation for Search Engine Optimization. And it is big business.

What it refers to is a series of strategies, some proven, some not, which aim to make your website more visible to the search engines, help the search engine index it more accurately, and therefore give you a higher placement in the search listings (closer to page).

The higher your rank, the more people are likely to click on your site.

The whole thing revolves around two factors:

Competition – The web is fiercely competitive. When you search any give term, you may come up with millions of hits, displayed on hundreds of thousands of pages. What good does it do if your page ends up on page 862, if people are not going to look past the first three pages of hits, or 10 if they are really digging deep?

Search Engine Technology – Search engines have their own rules. Some of those rules keep changing, but a few are pretty logically set and won't change. In order to optimize, you have to understand how the search engine sees and rates your page, and then help it to see your content more accurately.

Search engines see text. They do not see pretty pictures, and they mostly ignore colors (except in a few instances). No matter how gorgeous your site looks, it won't mean a thing to your ranking unless you have elements that the search engines can see and interpret correctly.

You'll hear the term "Keyword" tossed around a lot. A keyword is nothing more than a word that a person is likely to use to search for a particular topic. If you sell wide shoes, they may search "wide shoes", "e width shoes", "hard to find shoe sizes", etc. Those are all keywords, which may in fact be phrases, not just words. Some people get really anal about keywords, as though the whole search engine world revolves around getting just the right ones. I have a more casual attitude, so if you are thinking it has to be hard, relax.

The other term you need to know is "pagerank", because that is used in search engine optimization circles too. It merely means a number that the search engine gives you to determine how important your site is when weighed against others that seem to have information that is just as relevant as yours. When there are thousands of sites that seem to have relevant matching material for a search, the ones with higher pagerank get listed first.

Pagerank is determined by the search engine's evaluation of your site's popularity. It measures that popularity by how many sites out there have links to your site. The more sites you have linking back to you, the more popular they think your site is, so the higher they rank your page. Of course, in actual operations it is not that simple, but that is the theory anyway.

Search Engine Optimization involves two types of strategies:

Internal strategies which focus on improving the code and content of your pages so that the search engine can "see" them better and more accurately tell what the site is about.

External strategies which involve getting links back to your site to improve page ranking.

Each of these has some rules, and some strategies that you can use. Each of them has some strategies which you absolutely should NEVER use as well. And if you get nothing else from this page, PLEASE pay attention to the things you should not do, because they will not just waste your time, they can actually hurt your site's ability to get traffic.

With all the Search Engine Optimization hype out there, and all the conflicting information, some simplification is needed! It boils down to a simple rule:

If you can afford to pay for it, you don't need to be reading this. If you need to be reading this, you can do all of the most important things yourself.

The six things here are the ones that make the most difference for the least amount of effort.

1. Create a site with good text content. This is the NUMBER ONE search engine strategy. Without good text, no matter what else you do, your site will fail. If you have to pay for something, pay for help with this. Search

engines see text. They do not see images. If you create a site with a huge graphic on the home page, no meta tags, and no text, and just an image that says "click here", the search engine will have no way of knowing what your page is about! An image with text on it is NOT text. The search engine can only read text that was typed in directly on the page (or pasted in, etc). So make sure you have text on the page that tells what the page is there for. Write for PEOPLE first. Search engines second. If it is good for people, then it is more likely to be good for search engines.

What NOT to do: Do not use "hidden text". Make the text part of the page, or the search engine will be able to tell that it is hidden, and you can be penalized for that.

2. Use keywords in your text. Keywords are words that people think of to look for your site. If your site has a topic that people may refer to with several different sets of terms, then you need to use each one on the page in some way. A well written page will naturally use common terms anyway, so don't obsess about it. Make it clear in the first paragraph exactly what your site is about. Just explain well, and it will be good enough!

What NOT to do: Do not pack the page with keywords! Do not misuse them in an unnatural way. Do not use words that have nothing to do with your site either. Either tactic can hurt you with the search engines, and drive off customers. Just write well, and you won't have to worry about it much!

3. Use Alt Tags for images. Look this up in a book on HTML, or look up in your HTML editor program, since there is usually a simple way to put in an alt tag. An Alt tag is a specially coded bit of text that tells the browser to show that text if the image is not displayed. Alt tags can also help people with visual impairment to navigate a site better. A good alt tag will provide a concise description of the image, or the text on the image. Alt tags are also not a miracle fix, they are simply an easy thing to do to fine tune your site.

What NOT to do: Do not use Alt tags that are too long. Do not use Alt tags that are misleading either, and do not pack them with keyword lists.

4. Put in Meta Tags. Meta Tags are bits of code that are seen by the search engine and browser, but not by the site viewer. They can do a lot of things, but the two that we are concerned about are the Description and Keywords tags. A good site description will be informative, but not too long. It will describe key features using keywords. The keyword tag will contain words that tell the search engine what your site is about. Use good variety in your keywords.

A search engine looks for text in your site. It also looks at metatags. If there are no metatags, it uses part of the text in your site for the description - this can have unpredictable results! But even if you DO have metatags, some search engines quote parts of the text. And search engines will not pay much attention to keywords if they do not correlate with the site content. Don't worry about hiring a pro to analyze them, it won't be worth it if you have good content.

Most HTML programs have a simple way to insert Description and Keywords - sometimes under Document or Page Properties, sometimes under its own heading of Meta Tags. Put a comma between each keyword.

What NOT to do: Do not use keywords that are not appropriate for your site. Keep your description to the point and do not be misleading with it. Do not use a metatag generator that creates 10 different kinds of metatags - some of those will introduce errors into your site. Just worry about the Description and Keywords.

5. Use a title. This is also code behind the scenes that does not show in the page - it is the page title that shows in the top of the window of the browser. A shortcut for a site is to use a general title for the whole site, but a page title that reflects the actual page contents can be helpful. At the very least, you want one that names your site or business. Keep them short and to the point though. Use some keywords in the title, but keep them relevant and concise. Use a title that describes your business and that uses one good keyword or keyphrase. If you have to choose between your business name and a meaningful description, choose the description. This is actually the most important coding element that you can include to improve your search engine ranks.

What NOT to do: Do not leave the title as "untitled". That helps no one. And do not name the page inaccurately, or use a title that is more than a few words or a short phrase. A title that is too long or too crammed with keywords can get your site penalized, and there isn't room to show it all anyway.

6. Get inbound links. Inbound links are links on other people's sites that lead back to your site. Many search engines now keep track of how many other people think your site is worth linking to, and they consider that in how they rank your site. So exchange links, post to directories, and ask everyone you know to put a link on their site for you. Read more about linking in the later chapters in this book.

What NOT to do: Do not create seven other sites and link your site in to them in the hopes of fooling the search

engines into thinking your site is big. It won't work, because the age of the site also matters. Linking it into an existing sites helps, but that won't propel it to instant fame either. Do not buy "instant links", where someone promises to put your links on X number of sites overnight, those types of services do not work and will get you banned from the search engines (if you purchase text links, do so on one site at a time, on sites that will get you good traffic). Be careful what kind of traffic exchanges you participate in, some do not help rank or sales either one - who cares if you get tons of traffic if it does not help you sell anything? And watch out for popups... if your site has to have popups to get traffic, or your site appears on popups, you'll annoy your guests. When I talk about inbound links, that kind of traffic "generator" is not what I mean. I mean permanent links on other people's reputable sites. Stay away from Free Classifieds, or Free For All link sites, they get you lots of spam and no marketing advantage, but they CAN hurt your site. Each inbound link is a drop in a bucket. You need to aggressively pursue legitimate links, and not get sidetracked by hype.

There are a whole collection of other things that are not quite as critical, and for the sake of completeness, I'll list a few:

- Search engines do not like Javascript or Flash, so avoid those unless you have a major reason for using them. Large businesses can use them, because they can afford to market around them. Small startups cannot.
- If you have a php website, make sure the pages can actually get indexed by the search engines.
- A domain name with one keyword or keyphrase in it can help a tiny bit, but don't get in a knot if yours doesn't have one, because Wal-Mart ranks for toasters even though their domain is www.walmart.com.
- If you use keywords in your page links, and if you use keywords in your filenames, that reputedly helps - most people do that anyway because you choose a filename that is logical, and a keyword usually pops to mind.
- If you use H1 tags around your text titles, and bold important phrases that have keywords in them, that reputedly helps because you just indicated to the search engine that those words were more important.
- Your site structure helps too - if you lay out your site with a single focused topic per page, it helps you get traffic clear through your site, since any page can show up on searches.

Mostly, do what is logical. Don't ever try to trick the search engines into getting visitors that are not actually looking for what you have. And last, do what you can do easily, and don't worry too much about the rest. Search Engine Optimization is usually more about nudging your traffic, and not really about skyrocketing your numbers.

The tactics above are solid, and proven. They aren't going to change any time soon, and they are not based on tricks which will only hurt your site or cause you to have to re-write your site coding if the rules change.

Viral Marketing

Viral Marketing refers to marketing that spreads itself. There is nothing dishonest about the practice, though it is often misused. Learn how to make it work right for your business.

Viral marketing sounds nasty, but it is actually one of the great processes of the 21st century, which is becoming refined and applied more creatively all the time. It is often misused, so you must be careful to only use honorable tactics, but when used correctly, can develop power exponentially.

Viral marketing is built on a couple of concepts:

1. When you reach all of the people within your own sphere of influence, you can build a comfy little Mom and Pop business. When you take that one step further, and each person you contact reaches people within THEIR sphere of influence, the numbers explode in a much bigger potential.
2. If you provide incentives, most people are willing to do a bit of marketing for you in exchange for something you give them or do for them.
3. If you think creatively, you can figure out some kind of incentive to offer for almost any business.

Viral marketing consists of using other people to spread your marketing message far beyond the scope of your own reach. Affiliate marketing is perhaps the best known form of this, multiple tier programs especially. eBooks, Link Exchanges, Certain types of Freebies, MLM marketing, Article Marketing, Forwardable eZines, and Chain Letters are all forms of viral marketing. Chain letters are the one item in this list that are not ethical, and that are never used by legitimate businesses.

But lets explore how some of the other methods work, so you can understand the concepts that make them work. Once that is understood, you can come up with an idea to spread your own business in a way that does not cost you heavily.

Affiliate marketing is effective for many businesses because it compensates other people for reaching people within their sphere. When you pay only for sales, you only pay for results, so the cost of advertising is well contained. The real power of affiliate marketing comes from a multi-tier system. That means that for each person that signs up with you, you pay a certain commission on sales. Then you also pay them a commission on sales generated by anyone that signs up as an affiliate under them. This has far more power than a single level program, because your affiliates not only sell your product, they sell your affiliate program as well. The program has the potential to perpetuate itself far beyond the people who would normally come in contact with your business.

Distributorships and MLM marketing were the original concept behind all this. They have been so badly misused, and dishonorably sold though, that it can be quite difficult to succeed with one. They originated the concept of compensation on the sales of your downline though. True Multi Level Marketing is a form of viral marketing. In other words, marketing with an incentive built in to perpetuate itself.

I believe that the true power of viral marketing goes deeper than these common concepts though, and it is being applied in many ways across the net, and through offline tactics. Here are how some of those work:

eBooks - Giving away an eBook can show your expertise in a specific field. Giving away an eBook with the right of the recipient to give it away, means that it may spread far and wide. Because if you give someone something they can place as a download or incentive on their site, you have given them something of value. Just make sure that every copy contains your URL and contact information, and a description of what you do, and it becomes self-perpetuating advertising. Make sure your content is actually valuable though, a glorified ad will be of value to no one.

Link Exchanges - Link exchanges are pretty simple. You trade link for link with someone else. Each link from someone else's site to yours helps you a little. But it does not feed itself. To give it some power, you need to do one of two things: Figure out how to make other people come to you for trades, or figure out how to reward people for passing on your link. This can be as simple as setting up a form on your page for people to submit their links to (make sure you can review them before posting them so you weed out the illegals and the SPAMmers), to offering an incentive for a link placed (and that incentive can also have your URL on it and be replicatable so the recipient can give it away).

Freebies - There are all kinds of freebies on the net. Some have more value than others. And some are easier to use for marketing than others. Ideally, the best freebies for marketing are 1. Able to have a URL printed on them or embedded in them. 2. Replicable so that you can offer them unlimited times without it costing you more. 3. Free to pass on so that anyone who receives it and likes it can give it to someone else. 4. Genuinely valuable so that people will WANT to get it, and want to offer it as a freebie themselves. So don't just post a freebie on your site, figure out how that freebie can work for you long after it leaves your site, without being obnoxious to the recipient. Images can be watermarked, clipart can be created and posted for use with the stipulation that they link back to you on any page they use it on, entire websites or sections can be replicatable in return for link placements, RSS feeds can be branded, services can be traded for links, etc.

Articles - Post articles for free use by others, on the condition that your signature remain intact. In fact, you can put a notice in the signature line when you post them on your own site that states this, so if others post it on THEIR site, it is available for reprinting there too. If you post them on certain forums for exchange you won't be able to do that, but they will reach a good market usually anyway. Again, it MUST be more than just a glorified ad, or it won't get passed on.

eZines - eZines can become a form of viral marketing when they contain the notice at the bottom that the eZine may be forwarded intact to anyone. Taking it one step further, you can put a notice on articles that you write for it that invites people to reprint the article with the signature line intact.

Discounts - Discounts can be used as a means of spreading the word. If you include extra business cards with a discount printed on the back with each order that you fill for your customers, and invite them to share those cards, then your business is advertised to their acquaintances also.

Invitations - Any time you advertise a special event, sale, or new product, include an invitation to your customers to photocopy the flyer and pass it on. You can offer an incentive with this if you like - "Bring a friend and get a free gift". But make sure you can track and process the incentive accurately.

If you use it right, viral marketing has tremendous power. It is best when applied creatively to your site, and when it provides a truly useful product or service to others. The great thing about the web is that it is worth it to spend hours creating a good marketing incentive program, because once it is set up, it runs virtually on auto-pilot. It may take you weeks to produce a good quality eBook, or several days to write a really good article. But once it is done, it goes on working for you over and over with no real additional cost per person. An affiliate program will go on working for you with a monetary cost only when someone buys, and a distributorship, when set up intelligently, will go on replicating itself with very little ongoing cost. Images and articles will go out across the world into places you could not imagine, far beyond the few minutes you spent uploading them.

Make sure you never abuse your customer's confidence, and never become obnoxious about it. Viral marketing is based on value earned for value given, just as anything else is. The web just makes it very easy to give good value over and over. Somewhere in your business, there is something you can give as a marketing incentive. Do it creatively and generously, and it will come back to you many times over.

Opt-In Lists

I'm a bit of a radical, I do not believe that an opt-in list is an essential online marketing tool. I do believe that it is a helpful tool for SOME businesses, and that if it is used correctly, that it can increase your earning power. But let's make one thing absolutely clear (plug your ears if you've heard me say this before!).

The Money is NOT in the List! The BUSINESS is in RELATIONSHIPS.

To state that the money is in the list depersonalizes your customers, makes them an object to get gain from, and gives you a completely false impression of what an email list is to be used for. The statement refers to the mistaken belief that some internet marketers like to perpetuate, that you cannot run a successful business without a large opt-in email list. This is a false premise to begin with.

Yes, an email list CAN enhance some businesses. It is a waste of time for others. And it is always a waste of time if you have such an inconsiderate attitude about it, because you will never see your way clear to using it in a way that your customer actually appreciates if you think of them as a piggy bank, instead of as an individual with needs and desires which you can help to meet in an honest and genuine manner.

I cannot tell you how many email subscriptions I have canceled due to a selfish attitude on the part of the publisher. I could care less about what you want to sell me. I don't care about your latest thing that you want me to buy when you just sent me an email three days earlier about some other latest thing that you wanted me to buy then. And I REALLY don't care (in fact, it ticks me off) when you tell me about something, then remind me a day later, then warn me two days later that it is almost gone, then send me more warnings that I'll miss it if I don't get it now! I didn't want it the first time, and I am even less interested the fifth time!

To use a list properly, you need to use it to build relationships. Let them know who you are, and that you have hopes and dreams that they can identify with. Drop a note at the bottom that a specific item is on sale, or available, or tell them where they can find something related to what you want them to know, but do NOT make that the focus of the email! Give them something they WANT to hear - knowledge, instruction, humor, entertainment, etc. Give them a little piece of yourself that enhances their life in some way. You then are beginning to build a reciprocal relationship with them. If you want something from them, you must demonstrate a willingness to give first. And you must give them a reason to trust you - your information must be reliable and useful, or you must show constancy in being there on a regular basis even if it appears that you are not getting anything in return.

Your email list consists of people. You should feel that they are people that you care about, and want to help. That you want to make them smile. That if it were their child's birthday, you'd want to tell them to have a great day. If you don't feel that way, then you'll not ever realize the potential of a list, because you'll offend without having a clue how you even did it.

A list has to be reciprocal. It is not just for your benefit. It is primarily for THEIR benefit, or it won't be read. They'll buy from you when they care about you, trust you, and feel that you understand them.

If you have a business that can benefit from a list, then make the signup page accessible from every page in your site. Put a Privacy Policy link on the signup page, or print the privacy policy below the signup form so that anyone who wants to know how you intend to use their information will be reassured.

Put a notice on each newsletter that the email can be forwarded to anyone as long as it is intact. Put an invitation to authors for content, and an invitation for others to use your content as long as they leave your signature line in place. These elements won't have a huge effect, but they will lay the groundwork for growth beyond the confines of the list itself, giving it just a bit of viral potential.

Whether you choose plain text or HTML is a matter of preference, and of targeting it to your specific audience. Either way, you'll want to lay out the issue intelligently, and make sure that there is a listing of articles at the top of the page so that impatient readers can see immediately whether or not there is anything they need to read - if you DON'T put that, then impatient readers will just delete your email! It is an act of courtesy to tell them how to find what they want quickly.

Put ads between the articles, and at the end. Don't break articles with ads, people rarely click on them anyway if they are interested in the article, and if they are not interested in the article, they'll not get that far. Ads should be

there for those who want to see them, but easy to scan past for those that might be annoyed by them. Some people disagree with me, and say that you should put ads where they cannot be ignored, but for many audiences, this is a fatal tactic, as the only people then who will read your emails at all are those who don't mind being bugged all the time. They won't necessarily be the quality readers who will convert to valuable customers!

Keep your mailings considerate, and give the reader what THEY want first. Work what YOU want in around them.

Link Optimization

Link Optimization is a technique for giving your links higher relevancy value in search engines. This can occur on-site, and off-site, and has equal value either place as a marketing and search engine optimization technique.

Link optimization is considered a White Hat SEO tactic - that is, safe and recommended, as long as you do not go overboard, or use unrelated terms. It is a means of insuring that your hyperlinks and your site keywords are related to one another in as many places as possible online.

Onsite Link Optimization.

1. Use a full URL, not a relative URL. That means, code your links as "http://www.mysite.com/pagewhatever.htm" instead of "pagewhatever.htm". This means that each time you link within your site, the full URL is used in the link.
2. Use page filenames that mean something. This page has a filename that relates to the primary topic of the page. I don't know if that really helps much, but every little bit, you know...
3. Use anchor text keywords. Anchor text is the text that the hyperlink is embedded in. In the navigation menu, it is the names of the links to the other pages. Notice I have used very logical keywords for each link. Those keywords now appear on every page of my site, and they are tied directly to the pages that they link to.
4. Use a simple site structure. This will give your pages and links the full power of your SEO efforts.
5. When cross linking your sites, use keywords in your links.
6. Use keywords near your links if they are context or descriptive links. Anchor text is considered to be the most important text, but nearby words are also counted.
7. Use short anchor phrases. Do not make huge long sentences that are linked, that is considered to be at least Gray Hat SEO, if not Black Hat. Optimize a link for the MOST IMPORTANT keyword or keyphrase only.
8. If you are using an image link, then use an Alt Tag with your keywords in it. Same rules, keep it short and meaningful.

Onsite, you control everything. You can optimize to your heart's content, and tweak and nudge all you want. Offsite is another story, and you may not have very much control over it.

Offsite Optimization

1. The same rules apply for linking - use keywords in the anchor text, use descriptive text near the links, and link to full URLs (include the http://, and a pagename if applicable).
2. You can optimize your links in your signature line. That sig line will find its way around the net in a surprising number of places.
3. When you cannot use HTML in your sig line, use a full url, with descriptive text near it. Always use this tactic when you are leaving a sig line somewhere that might get converted to plain text (anchor text links are lost then).
4. You cannot control what other people do with your link on their site unless you are paying for the link. So don't fret about whether other people optimize your links or not, any link is better than none.
5. You can put HTML code for text links on your link exchange page, but some people still will not use it. You also end up with all the inbound links looking the same, and variety is actually better even if some are not optimized.
6. Variety counts. If you do put HTML code on your page for others to use to link to your site, then offer multiple choices or change it a little on a regular basis.
7. Optimized banner ads are best, but some webmasters won't do it right. HTML code on your page is best for image ads anyway because it allows you to track the ad performance, but some will just want the image and link.
8. Any time you post your URL, post the COMPLETE URL, including "http://". The reason for this is that many programs online automatically convert full URLs into a hyperlink, which will be counted toward pagerank by the

search engines. Clickable links get you more site traffic from both people, and search engines, so include the entire URL to have the best chance of always having a clickable link.

Link optimization is something that you do as you go along. When you create your site navigation and do your linking, the extra second it takes for you to do it right can make a difference in the end.

But it is also not a hugely critical thing. There are tons of sites that use internal catch phrases for linking instead of keywords, that nevertheless do well because of content. So do what you can, and then don't fuss about the parts you cannot control.

Printable Downloads

Printable downloads are good for specific marketing types, and as an enhancement to others. They can save you time and money, as well as make marketing materials available on demand.

There are a few circumstances in which a printable download can help a business directly:

1. Printable catalog. For some sites, if the inventory is extensive, a printable catalog can help customers to be able to browse items offline at their leisure.
2. Printable Brochures. For items that people might want to think over, or discuss with someone else, having a printable brochure on your website that gives an overview of product benefits can be an asset.
3. Printable Order Forms. Some customers still prefer to order offline. Not many, but you may get a few orders from people who would otherwise not order if you have an order form that they can easily print and use.

These are all little things, and only applicable to certain business types. The real power in printable downloads comes from businesses which have affiliate programs or distributorships.

The cost of printing can then be passed on to your resellers - this is not a disservice to them, it spares them the cost of ordering them, and makes them more convenient. They can print them on demand instead of having to order them in bulk.

These items can be downloadable in a distributor only area, or affiliate area, depending on what is needed.

Items which can be used in this manner are:

1. Business cards with a write-in spot for referral name or distributor name, OR, a business card template in a format that is common (Printshop, or Serif PagePlus which is a freely downloadable program).
2. Brochures. Distributors can print out brochures on demand also - make sure you leave a 1/2 inch margin around the edge of the documents, so that they will print well on an inkjet printer.
3. Price lists, policy sheets, instructional literature, and other informational documents.

In fact your entire distributor pack can be downloadable in electronic format. Alternately it can be delivered on CD, which is far more cost effective for the parent company. It passes the actual cost on to the distributor, weeds out the costs for distributors who are not serious about the business, and allows you to make your resale program available to people who are on a limited budget, but who have the energy and drive to work the business.

Printable downloads are not an asset to every business, but for some, they can prove a huge benefit, which gives convenience to customers and resellers, while reducing expenses for printing items that are not fully used.

*You'll notice I did not say "Posting to Forums",
I said "Forum PARTICIPATION".*

Participation is the key here! Nobody loves a spammer!

Spamming forums is a no-no. It is a bad marketing tactic only used by lowlifes who have no consideration for others.

Think about it... Do you participate in forums just to read the ads of other people? Do you pay any attention to their ads? If YOU don't, then what makes you think someone else will? If it annoys you to see other people just blast ads and contribute nothing useful, then you can be assured that you will only annoy other people if you do the same. Just because it is YOUR product and YOU think it is neat, does not mean anyone else will feel differently about your inconsiderate ads than they do about other spammer's inconsiderate ads!

Auto-posting is even worse - it is not only inconsiderate, it is totally ineffective.

So, what DO you do?

First of all, choose your forums carefully. Forums can benefit you in two ways:

1. By networking with other professionals, you can learn more about how to operate your business successfully.
2. By sharing your expertise, you can gain the trust and respect of other people, and meet potential clients or customers.

There are two distinct purposes there, and two distinct types of forums. Do NOT confuse the two purposes, or you'll be wasting your time with forum posts!

To network with other professionals, choose forums which are aimed at professionals. For example, I'd join a Web Design Professionals forum. I would use that forum to ask questions, and gain professional knowledge. I would NOT promote my service there, though I WOULD leave my URL at the end of every post (the search engines will still see that, and it will help my pagerank).

To use a forum as a marketing venue, I'd choose a forum that had a high percentage of people who NEED my services and expertise. I could choose a forum for Learning Web Design, or Web Design Startup. I could choose a New Business Forum, where a lot of people might have need for a website - since I also know a lot about starting businesses, this is a good fit.

Now, when I have chosen a forum to market TO, I would NOT send them ads! When someone asked a question, I would ONLY give them a link to a FREE resource that I have. When someone asks for help, and you reply with "I sell this service, email me!!!", then you are considered rude. Trust me on this one, do NOT reply to a cry for help with nothing but an ad!

Instead, offer REAL help. Give them genuine information that helps them know what it is that they need. If they then know that they need additional help, they will go to the person who already helped them the most, and who they could understand!

Indirect marketing is by FAR the most effective way to make headway on forums. Give helpful information that genuinely demonstrates your skills in a kind way, and then drop a signature line at the bottom to tell them who you are and what you do.

The only exception to this is when someone says, "I am looking for a part for this item, and cannot find it!" Then they are asking to BUY something, and it is appropriate to reply OFF LIST, that you have the item, or can get it. The off list part is important, because that person ASKED for an ad... No one else on the list did! Even then, be polite, and apologize if the offer is not wanted.

You must always follow the rules for posting on forums. Some allow signature lines, some do not. The vast majority do though, and your signature line is the way that you market. A short, simple signature line, with a single URL on it (targeted to the topic in question - two URLs maximum!) will get traffic from people who are interested in what you have, because of what you SAID in your post.

Some people use a Pre-Written signature line. I never do. I have 30 websites, and offer a range of services. So

when I drop a sig line, I target the URL to whatever is most appropriate for the post in question. If someone is asking about quick and healthy meals, I drop one URL. If they are asking about how much is reasonable to spend on a website, I drop a different one. I keep them very simple so I can type them fast - an example would be:

Laura
Mom to Eight
Owner, Article Marketing Magic
<http://www.articlemarketingmagic.com/>

That sig line works ANYWHERE, whether HTML is allowed or not. And I can quickly change it to:

Laura
Mom to Eight
Owner, Parenting With Joy
<http://www.joyfulparenthood.com/>

Or:

Laura
Mom to Eight
Owner, Firelight Web Studio
<http://www.firelightwebstudio.com/>

This makes it very easy for me to target the exposure of my sites, to get a new site exposed quickly, and to keep from having a sig line that lists 30 URLs! It is far more effective with this many sites to do this, than it is to use a single doorway page, because people would come in, and get lost in the home page with that many topics coming off the page!

Forums are a great way to get going, and they were the primary means of building my business the first time around. I participated on Computer Help forums, and met many great clients and customers there - some of whom, seven years later, still email me to see how my family is doing, even though I no longer market those services. I am still referred to regularly on one forum as "the Mac Guru", and as a very smart lady, even though I have not posted there more than twice in the last three years.

Just don't abuse them, or think of them as open season on spamming. Follow the rules, and use them in the right way. You'll get further, build solid business contacts, and your time will be well spent in the long term.

Bloggging for Business

Bloggging follows the same rules as Article Marketing - It is free (unless you have to hire help), it is friendly and helps with the relationship process, and it **MUST** be indirect to be successful. **NO ONE** is going to check in regularly to read ads!

Free blogs on Blogger.com, or WordPress.com offer you the advantage of a ready-built bloggging community to tap into. Self-hosted ones offer more flexibility, less of a chance of it getting deleted (Blogger has that reputation), but a little more risk in some ways.

The key is that you provide posts that people are interested in - they have to give them something they want, that they consider to be valuable.

Value may mean instructions, information, humor, warmth, reviews, recipes, ideas, encouragement, etc. It can be anything that they feel a need for in their life.

And it has to be regularly provided. Bloggers are a hungry lot. They can be taught to diet on a schedule of once a week, but less than that, and they'll starve. They also get testy if they are used to an every other day schedule, and you drop them unexpectedly and leave them hanging. Like a bowel-fixated senior citizen, regularity is important to them.

So, in order to make it work, you have to be pretty gregarious and you have to have plenty to say that is worth saying. Some people operate a blog by finding words from others to post, and while this is acceptable some of the time, it is not going to produce quality stuff that keeps them coming back for more if that is all you have to offer. It is like a diet of TV dinners - they can get it anywhere. They want home cooking. They want it fresh, and they want it to be digestible.

Bloggers tend to be more impatient than other website visitors also. They want something that gets to the point. Don't waste their time with a tidbit that tries to lure them somewhere else every time. They will be willing to visit your site if you link it in, but they expect you to earn that visit.

If you cannot produce good quality regular content, then you are better off with article marketing, which does not require a regular schedule.

Bloggging won't bring you a flood of business instantly. It is like the other forms of free marketing - it takes time to establish, and time to grow, and then frequently the benefits will be indirect.

A blog can provide three basic benefits:

1. Clickthroughs from links to your site that you put on your blog. These are easy to track.
2. A minor increase in pagerank from links in the blog that go back to your site.
3. A viral benefit as your blog link gets picked up and syndicated, IF you have something good enough to syndicate.

You'll have to promote your blog too though. When you have a website, and a blog, you have to promote them both, which can complicate the marketing tasks for some businesses. You are the only one who can decide if it is worth trying, and then determine whether it is worth it for you to keep doing it.

Expect to have to give it three months before you'll have an idea of whether it is sustainable. By that time, you should be able to see at least a potential.

Networking

There seems to be a lot of confusion among new business owners as to what, exactly, networking IS. The most common misconception is that it is a whole new bunch of people to market to.....

WRONG!!!

Networking consists of two facets:

1. Getting to know people who have business experience and business knowledge or assets, which they are willing to use for mutual benefit, or which they are willing to share in the interests of kindness. You network in trade associations, business professional forums, MLM groups, and other gatherings of business people, to learn from one another, and to find prospects for joint ventures and collaborations.
2. Participating as an expert in forums for people who need knowledge that you have. You do this to build relationships with prospective clients, but you HELP, and give good advice FIRST, and marketing is only a secondary (abstract) facet of that. You never market to them, you never advertise to them, you just be helpful, be a real person, and drop your signature line as an afterthought in case they want to contact you professionally.

You need to choose the networking venues with your purpose in mind. If you market to either one of these, you'll fail! If you spam them, you'll get kicked out. If you try to sell to people who are selling the same thing you are, you'll not make any headway.

When people talk about how good a marketing tool networking is, they are not referring to some quick fix. They are talking about learning, developing relationships, collaborating, getting great ideas, and helping people who eventually become a customer. But the helping, the collaboration, and the giving happens FIRST.

If you just advertise to your networks, you'll not have good results. It sounds faster, but is actually a dead end. The seemingly slower course DOES take time! But it pays off in solid and lasting dividends that are SO worth it.

I have met some people on forums that have truly benefited my life. At its simplest, we traded links. Some people put links to my new sites on their sites just because they loved the content, without asking for a return link. Someone on a forum asked me to be a guest speaker for their radio show - this was many months after I began to participate in the forum. I learned some new marketing and web design skills from conversations on one forum. I got a couple of web design contracts from another forum, but I did not ONCE offer outright to build a site for anyone! In fact, the only time I mentioned that I built sites was when someone asked me directly what I did to earn, or in a sig line (and my signature line varies with the topic). I have gained many lifelong customers from forums, but it was from polite and kind offers of help, not from advertising. I was offered the chance to participate as co-author in a viral eBook, given the opportunity to moderate a forum that helped to set me up as an expert, and I have been publicly praised for my expertise on forums. I have gained confidence to move forward with a new site venture from comments from other business owners on forums, and I have developed many personal friends.

Now, some forums are too chatty for me. I don't need to hear that someone's dog got sick, and I don't need to read forwarded emails on my forums. I want information and conversation that helps me to succeed. Friendship woven into it is fine, but I don't need the bulk of the mail to be frivolous topics. So I choose forums that don't waste my time. Otherwise I could spend all day chatting and answering emails instead of working. That would not help me.

I choose forums that deal with topics that I need to learn, or that I can help someone else learn. I choose my trade associations and other networking venues the same way. They have to offer me something of value, and they have to have the potential to interact with other business owners in a way that benefits my business, instead of wasting my time or money. Networking, in that context, is very powerful.

We also joined two different Chambers of Commerce. Both are providing benefits to us, partly because we market Business to Business. But carefully selected networking groups or trade associations can help you to develop business relationships that pay off in unexpected and delightful ways.

Is it fast? No. Nothing truly good ever is! And it's a bit of work, but no so much that it drowns you.

Offering a sincere and helpful bit of information takes just 5-10 minutes.

Is it worth it? On every level, yes.

Targeting Your Market

In marketing, there are two approaches, often referred to as the "shotgun" approach, and the "sharpshooter" approach. Now, while I do not think that customers are prey to be hunted, there IS some wisdom in this analogy.

The Shotgun approach is when you do a lot of cheap ads, that scatter a lot of marketing over a group of people, in the hopes that one might be interested and buy. It is a form of "non-targeted" advertising.

The Sharpshooter approach is when you aim your ads directly at people whom you know are already interested in what you have.

In the internet world, there is little excuse for NOT targeting your ads! There are ways you can do it that do not even involve research or expense. Merely choosing to advertise using smart keywords, or putting your ads on sites that deal directly with the topic of your site is a means of tightly targeting your ads.

Targeting starts with WHERE you advertise, but it also includes HOW you advertise. Your incentives need to be related to your product, your marketing messages need to appeal to the people who are most likely to buy your product.

You'll notice that when you get your newspaper, there are circulars inserted into it. There will be ads for cars, pizza, groceries, etc. You'll notice that the ads that are included in there are for things that pretty much EVERYONE needs. With those items, there is no need to target.

If, on the other hand, you sell replacement parts for laptops, a circular insert is NOT a good idea. You'll pay for every one of those ads that gets thrown away, and there is a greater chance that they WILL be thrown away since they are not targeted. If you mailed the same insert though, to readers of a computer repair professional magazine, the numbers would be quite different! The percentage that got thrown away would be far fewer.

The same rules work online. And they are the reason that Traffic Exchanges, SafeLists, and Announcement Lists do not work. Everyone is there to SELL, not to buy! No one is interested in your product! And marketing to people who you KNOW are not interested is just a waste of your time or money.

On the other hand, if you use article marketing, that delivers VERY highly targeted marketing, because you can write an article about a topic which directly pertains to your business, and attract people who want what you have. Some writers don't seem to get that though - I see articles about cats and dogs which are written by people who have a web marketing business. Where's the connection? As a reader, I'm not interested in clicking their link!

With marketing, it is much better to be a sniper. Aim your marketing at the people who logically WANT it, not at people who could care less.

Niche Differentiation

A niche is nothing more than a specialization - it can be a broad specialization, or a very specific one. A niche can be formed around a product, a specific group of people who buy that product, or the way you sell the product.

It is really just a variation on what has been called "Market Differentiation". The concept here is, "Why would I buy from you instead of from the other thousands of people who are selling an identical product?"

Recently, the term "niche" has come to mean finding keywords that people want, but which have lower competition. As though, by applying a simple formula, you can guarantee business success. It is not nearly that simple, nor that limiting.

The scope of niche marketing is more than that. It has to do with making your business different in a way that appeals to a specific group of people who are underserved. Sounds easy, but there are some catches to it.

1. People who need what you have, may not know what to call it. They may be searching for it under the same terms as everyone else uses for a broad category that is not meeting their needs. For example, they may be searching for "Natural Diabetes Control", and only able to find sites where someone is selling some herbal product, when what they really want is a pure informational site that is produced by an objective third party. How does one search for that, as different from the typical?
2. Similar to the first problem, but distinctly different - You may have to use the same keywords as people who are not offering what they say they are - for example, in the work at home world, I have to use the terms "legitimate work at home", because that is what I offer. BUT... thousands upon thousands of work at home sites, all of them with more powerful marketing budgets than I have, are using those same terms. And they DON'T mean what I mean. They advertise the same old half-scams which don't work. Even if you target exactly who you want, you may have competition that makes it difficult for you to be found in the masses.
3. Even when you have the right niche, and the right product, and the right keywords, you will still have competition. In our world, it is virtually impossible to create a site that does NOT have competition. If it did not have competition, it would not have good demand either... the nature of marketing. So niching is only a solution to more accurately targeting your market and finding the people who need what you have, it is not a means of eliminating all competition.
4. If you create soft dolls in a unique way, and that is an overcrowded niche, but creating stuffed pigs is an under-served market, it does you no good if your particular brilliancy is in soft dolls! Sometimes what we do well enough to succeed at is just IN a crowded market. There may be ways that we can nudge it into a further specialization that narrows the focus some, but often there is not. I produce work at home information. Talk about a crowded niche! I am not competing with thousands, I am competing with millions. But that is what I am expert at, and that is what people who know what I do WANT me to do - there IS a demand for it, but it is still hard to compete. There would be no point in switching to a less crowded market if I am not good at actually creating the materials for that market. If you have to choose between what you are good at, and what the numbers say you should do, and you cannot find a balance, then go with your gut, and do what you do best.
5. Your keywords have to target what you actually HAVE. A woman has a website that gets the number one search engine placement on a specific phrase. She uses that phrase in a unique way. Unfortunately, it is an industry term that high end professionals are using in a different way. They come to her site, and do not find what they want, and they leave. She gets LOTS of natural search engine traffic on that one phrase, but she does NOT get customers, because they are not finding what they want. She occupies the top of the niche, but she is not able to get customers because they want something different than what she is offering.
6. You have to market where your potential customers are. If you are using a net in the ocean, and you are trawling randomly, you may catch a fish or two, but you won't do very well. If, on the other hand, you search out the schools of fish that are clustered together, you can dip in your net and bring up a haul. People are not fish, but they do tend to congregate in predictable groups. Find a way to market to groups of people who need what you have, and you'll do much better than if you just blast ads at random.

Targeting a niche market is more than just picking keywords or deciding that you want to do a specific thing. It is reflected in everything you do, from the design and layout of your site, to the wording of your marketing materials, to the packaging of the product or service and the way you interact with your customers or clients.

Market differentiation or niching has some strong points too:

1. You can form a niche around any uniqueness. Some potential niches are: unique product, unique service, better product, better service, higher value (more than just price), better service, more hand-holding in technical sales, lower price (not a good choice), for specific personality types (humorous, academic, busy, etc), for specific problem solving (hard to find size, health related, niche career problems, beginners, etc).
2. You can choose a "crossover niche". These can be very powerful. My [Natural Diabetes Control](#) site is a good example, because it hits the Diabetes niche, and the Natural Health niche, combining the two into a more specific niche that gets very good traffic.
3. You can set up a website to target a broad niche, with individual pages that target more specific elements of that niche. A well-laid out site can draw visitors in from any page. Each individual page targets a certain topic, and is optimized for its own keyword set. Again, my Natural Diabetes Control site is a good example, because it has pages on Cinnamon and Diabetes, Aloe and Diabetes, etc. The site has about 60 pages of specific content, and only about 1% of the traffic comes in through the home page. The vast majority comes in through other pages, which are each targeted to a different mini-niche.
4. You can build multiple websites, each with a slightly different focus. I have a website for Work at Home Moms that addresses the issues of balancing home and family, another that has step by step instructions, another that has work at home reviews, one that has step by step instructions for building AdSense sites, and a series of sites on marketing, web design, and business tactics that relate to the topic in one way or another. Each one of those sites targets a specific niche within the broad topic. And because I have more than one site, even though the competition is very stiff, people who come into one site are likely to look at another site of mine if they don't find what they want on one of them (they are cross linked with relevant sites).

No matter what you do, whether you sell products, services, information, or whether you profit from advertising, you have to find a way to make your offerings unique and desirable, and to get them found. Targeting customers, marketing where they are likely to be, and providing something special is what sets the successes apart from the wannabes.

Press Releases

Some "experts" on free marketing will tout press releases as though they are a magic bullet. As another highly overused and abused marketing tactic, they are difficult to write well, and hard to get printed. When they do, they work very well, when they don't, they are a waste of time.

The biggest hindrance to the effectiveness of press releases is narcissism. And it hinders not only the egotistical business owner, but it also makes it harder for all the honest and sensible ones!

You see, with a press release, there is one major concept that seems to elude self-centered business owners:

In order to get something printed, it must be NEWS!

Just because it is exciting to you, does not mean it is news. It needs to be interesting to OTHER people. Glorified ads aren't interesting, they are trashy.

News is something that people WANT to know... That means it has significance to them aside from its relation to your business.

A business opening is usually news, IF the business is unique. Nobody cares that you joined an MLM and now have a product to sell. If you do something unique, and needed, then that is news.

If you are sponsoring an event that helps other people, that other people want to know about either to apply for help, or to assist in helping, that is news. If you are holding a sale and calling it an event, it is not news, it is advertising.

And even when something happens that IS news - you were honored with an award (makes your community look good too), or you got a contract that will allow you to hire more people, it is only news if it is the BEST news that can be found that day.

Timing is a fickle element that intrudes on press releases. It isn't hard to get upstaged by someone else who did something bigger than what you did.

Crafting a good press release is a skill, and getting it noticed is even more of a skill. Since every single small business submits press releases, and since 99% of the press releases submitted are trash, you have about 5 seconds to persuade the reader that yours is NOT trash.

Now, I don't submit press releases. I don't have the time to bother submitting things to someone who is pretty certain to decide that someone else is doing something more important than what I am. But then, I live in Medicine Bow, Wyoming. There is no local press here. It is all in nearby towns, who are more concerned with what is going on THERE, than with what is going on here. Perhaps twice in 8 years of being in business, I have had an event that was newsworthy - I started a local newspaper - I revised and expanded the town website (twice, actually). But they would not care about the little triumphs, and I am smart enough to know that. So I don't waste my time. I do things that have a far better chance of actually working.

Don't think of press releases as free advertising. Think of them as someone to share truly important news with, and only expect them to appreciate the sharing if it makes their job of finding REAL news easier. When you use them that way, they can get your business name into the public eye in a way that gives you great credibility.

Guest Appearances

These are hard to get at first, but once you develop a little bit of a reputation, they will walk into your life, and you may have to be choosy about what you do. Guest appearances allow you the chance to promote yourself for free, or even while being paid, and they provide the best possible type of promotion - it builds credibility, expertise, and begins the process of relationship marketing.

With guest appearances, it is all about your reputation and name. If you have made a name for yourself, you can expect to be paid for them. At first though, you do free guest appearances, strictly for the promotion.

There are far more opportunities for these than ever before. With the technology available to startup businesses, someone is always running a teleclass, webinar, or podcast where they need guest speakers. If you are comfortable speaking, it is a good way to start out.

Many are conducted in interview format. Some interviewers will allow you to prepare, some want the interview to be more spontaneous. You'll occasionally have a live audience, and that can be very unpredictable.

When possible, prepare by writing down some answers to questions you are likely to be asked. You may or may not have the opportunity to refer to your notes, but even if you don't, you are more likely to remember details and points of importance if you have previously written it down and gone over the responses.

Guest speaking is just another means of replicating information, and of creating a viral type info-product that goes on working for you to get indirect business referrals. People ask for speakers based on the perceived value of what they know. They don't care whether you sell the best product in the world. They want to know how you know it is the best product. They want generic information that applies to ALL products like yours, not a glorified ad about your product. Check out the article marketing info if you want more information on the kinds of information people want to replicate.

So when you prepare an example replies in advance, make them objective, and make them valuable to everyone, not just to people who buy your product. Never refer to "our product" or "in my company" unless it is in a way that is applicable to other situations.

To prepare for live speaking engagements, you'll need to practice. You can practice in front of a mirror if you'll be visible, or just go over your material while speaking it out loud.

Written words and spoken words often use a slightly different phrasing. So actually speaking responses out loud is important, because it helps your tongue and lips practice saying phrases that may be awkward. This may be especially important if you use technical terms that must be said in the right way, or if you have product names that must be exact.

If you want to be able to do public speaking, you have to do two things:

1. Develop the skills. You can join Toastmasters, or you can just get lots of practice other ways, but do SOMETHING to learn to speak comfortably in public. I have taught classes in church to people of all ages, as well as having taught a few public school classes, I have made presentations to our Town Council, and had the opportunity for a range of other public speaking opportunities, so when I was first asked to do an interview, I was nervous, but knew I could speak well and confidently. My major concern was being able to properly frame my words and descriptions - since I usually write, I don't have to come up with spontaneous instruction, I can usually think about the best way to say it.
2. Develop the reputation. No one is going to ask you to speak if you are a nobody. You have to get your name out there, and you have to have good information that they want. You don't have to be THE expert in your field, but you have to have some experience in the area that they want to know about, and some evidence that you do have that experience. For me, this came as a result of having written instructional materials on my websites, and from having contributed to a book that was published by a trade association. Tell the truth, give valuable information, and market it, and eventually someone will ask you if you want to do a guest appearance..

You'll have to be willing to start small. At first, when you make a public appearance - in person or just voice - do

not expect people to mass to the event. You may get only one or two people in the audience. Your host may themselves be just starting out (otherwise they'd get someone more prestigious). The lack of an audience may seem somewhat humiliating, but you'll need to focus on other things.

For one thing, many voice shows and engagements are recorded. People may have the opportunity to hear you long after the event has ended. In fact, this may be one reason that they are not listened to very well - if people know they can hear it later, they may not feel the need to tune in at the time.

Leveraging

Businesses tend to build momentum over time, where marketing gets easier and less costly. One of the reasons this happens is because the greater your customer base, the more you can leverage it to your benefit.

Leveraging is nothing more than using success in one area to make success in another area more likely.

When I built my first website, it took a year or more to get any kind of response. Partly because I was green and did not know how to properly market it, but also because I was starting from a base of nothing.

Once that website was established, I could use it not only for what I had originally intended, but I could use it to promote anything new that I wanted to start.

This is leveraging at its simplest. Using an existing advantage to create an additional benefit.

On a local (offline) basis, I began with offering computer services. Later, I started a local newsletter format newspaper (there is no news service here). That newspaper was built on the foundation that my computer business formed. Then the newspaper became a marketing tool for the computer business, and for additional endeavors.

I now own over 30 separate websites, and am able to leverage them to benefit my entire business in all sorts of ways. I can also use them to help other businesses get a foot in the door, through link exchanges or low cost ads.

There are many ways in which you can leverage once you get started. Some of those ways include:

1. Cross linking websites. This is a very simple way of using the pagerank and established search engine listings of one site to jump-start a new site.
2. Cross promoting your businesses. Even if you have totally unrelated offerings, you'll still have crossover customers or viewers. You can use marketing campaigns in one line to benefit another.
3. If you cross link your sites, then you can use Pay Per Click on one site, and it can often increase the traffic to other sites as well.
4. Joint Ventures. Once you have a customer base, you have something to leverage against someone else's customer base. You can join with other business owners to help one another. Look under Collaborations on this site for details.
5. Combine two separate displays in an offline event, by sharing a booth for multiple business lines. You need to keep them at opposite ends of the booth if you do this, but it can save you the cost of two booths or separate events.
6. Create a doorway site to market multiple websites with a single promotional URL. This helps you consolidate your advertising, and it can bring in crossover customers.
7. Create a double sided business card. Put a different business on each side. This can also bring in crossover customers.
8. Participate in viral marketing projects. For many, if you make multiple contributions, you can promote multiple URLs. For very little extra time, you can promote a single viral marketing item through several of your sites, and promote multiple business lines.

The catch to it is, that you have to build a little bit of a base from which to leverage, before you can use it in these ways. It takes about a year of hard work to get to the point where you have enough of a base to use it to any real advantage. But once you have it, it will grow consistently, and sometimes exponentially.

When you have more than one line of business, look at your marketing methods, and consider how marketing one item might be used to benefit others. Sometimes you can greatly reduce your overall marketing costs just by setting things up so that one marketing method spills over into another business line.

Get the right types of marketing, combined with the right cross promoting tactics, and your business will develop an awesome marketing power.

Volunteering

Volunteering is something you do from the heart, but it has the potential to benefit your business too. I'd never recommend that someone volunteer just to help their business, but for those who struggle between the lack of time to do everything, and the desire to help as often as possible, I'd encourage them to take the time when they can to give services or time for free, with the reassurance that it DOES come back to them.

I do several things as a volunteer. I moderate a group online, I own a few groups online, I donate web services to a few non-profit corporations, I am an assistant den leader for Cub Scouts, I have served as coordinator for a local event, and I frequently offer web assessment and improvement recommendation services to startup businesses. I donate used computers to local families that need a computer also. I have created printed items for good causes, and donated other web and graphical design services also.

Those are pretty small things. There are not a lot of formal opportunities out here, so I do what I can within the limitations of my life. But those things have helped me to establish my expertise, along with giving me the chance to give, which I enjoy.

Even a non-profit organization won't trust an idiot. They won't accept services from someone who is not professional. And donating my services got my URL on the bottom of every page of their site as the creator, which helped my pagerank and helped me build my reputation when I was trying to re-establish my business.

Giving away computer systems locally has helped to establish me as THE computer expert, and the person to go to for computer needs. Donating services got my name around even though I did not do it for that reason.

I also firmly believe that in order to get, you must first give. Volunteering is not only an indication that you are kind, it also invokes the law of "what goes around comes around". I truly believe that the kinder you are, the more blessed you will be. It has proven true in my own life. I have seen amazing blessings come as a direct result of something I did just because I felt I ought to, even when I wasn't sure I had the time to.

You do have to balance your time, and you ARE in business to make money. But time taken to volunteer to do whatever you can that is reasonable really does benefit your business in surprising and unexpected ways. Go with your intuition - when something in you desires to do it, and there is a way that you can, then dive in and give it your best with no thought of return.

It isn't just the human thing to do, it is also wise and intelligent.

About the Author



This book was entirely written by Laura Wheeler, CEO of Firelight Business Enterprises, Inc.. She is a busy Mom of Eight children, five of whom are still at home. She homeschools, and works her business in around the needs of her family. She puts in long hours, and manages to complete the equivalent of full time work most days. She subcontracts some services to trusted sources, and works personally with her clients.

Way back in 1982, she took a two week course in computer usage. She failed it utterly, and could not understand the command line interface used at the time. About 14 years later, the family was gifted a Mac Classic. After a little tentative exploration of the use of it, she found that she could actually understand how to use it quite well. She bought a copy of Macs for Dummies, and within 6 months had reformatted the hard drive just to see if she could.

Within two years they upgraded their computer to a new model, and Laura was hired in a small school as a computer instructional aide. Her business was started a few months later. At first it was just printing, word processing, and data entry. Not many people had home computers in the small town they lived in, so she got a bit of work doing that. She kept learning more about computers, and built her first computer system shortly after. She learned graphics processing, page layout, and copy writing in this time period also.

She saw her first website in 1999. Five months later she was awarded a contract with the Town of Medicine Bow to redesign and maintain the town website. She began building websites for herself and others, picking up contracts with the Wyoming Dental Association, and the Historic Virginian Hotel, and several others. She built many websites for a variety of purposes, including craft sales, electronic specialty services, non-profit organizations, and many more.

When Laura began business, she had no money to spare. Her business was build around the ownership of a computer, printer, scanner, and later an internet connection. She bought software when she could afford it, and learned to use free software when she could not afford it. She knew that if she did things the "recommended way", she'd be heavily in debt, and might never crawl out from under it. There had to be a way to start with nothing but work and determination, and that is what she did. Since she was in a small town, her business evolved into several lines of work in order to fill local need. Her website services encompassed everything a client needed, because her clients could not afford to hire a team. This need gave her a broad base of skills in all areas of website design, layout, and administration.

In 2003, her youngest son was diagnosed with cancer. She resigned as web administrator for the Town and for several other contracts. Her business was streamlined so that it could be flexible enough to accommodate sometimes unpredictable medical needs. Her websites were closed down, and new ones were established which would adapt themselves to a more flexible work schedule. Basically, she took her experience and equipment, and started over. Most of her business lines involving house calls, building or troubleshooting equipment, and anything else that was not portable, was shut down. She began putting more effort into her own website work and instructional writing. She began building shopping carts, exploring more web marketing strategies, and developed more expertise in the home business market. During this time she did not make a lot from her work, but spent a lot of time laying a good foundation. When the work began to pay, it did so whether her schedule was predictable or not.

Life interfered again with a difficult pregnancy. Near the end she was put on bedrest and bought a laptop. Her baby died a few minutes after birth, and after a month of heavy grief during which she could not bring herself to face the task of writing down the story, she began hard work on her websites again. She feels that work saved her sanity during this time. The worst part about losing a child is the emptiness and the purposelessness. Work kept her occupied and she made rapid progress with her sites. Within five months she build and established over a dozen sites. Her client base began to grow again, and her ability to offer more extensive services grew also. Her business is now fully portable, and she has gained the ability to work in spite of family crises (which have occurred with regular frequency), and in almost any location.

One reason Laura is good at working with shoestring startups, is because she has done it. Not once, but twice, and with multiple business lines. She knows how long it takes to get orders or traffic. She knows the inexpensive ways to get that traffic, and she understands what makes a customer or visitor feel comfortable on a site so that they will purchase or come back. She is also skilled at teaching other people what she has learned, and knows how to explain it in terms that they can understand if they have no experience with it.

The Town of Medicine Bow has reissued the web contract to Laura. They contracted with her to redesign their site, and to write an extensive website administrative manual for the Town. After the completion of that, she has since maintained and expanded the site for them. They feel she is simply the best person to do the job, in producing a quality site for the town, marketing it effectively without unnecessary or ineffective expenditure, and in making good design decisions that suit the resources and specific needs of their small businesses. The Town Council also trusts her to give them accurate information about what is genuinely needed, and to honorably fulfill the terms of the contract.

Her experience and expertise are unique. She knows the backroads that nobody else travels, which can save time and money. She understands which of the "experts" are telling the truth, and which ones are just trying to get you to buy their product. She knows that there is one truth for large corporations with healthy advertising budgets, and another nearly hidden truth for small startups that don't have money to waste. She understands how hard it is in these times for the little guy to get a foot in the door and make a place for himself in a world that is dominated by the mega-corporations. And she understands which back doors will actually get you inside, and which ones will get you mugged. She is good at assessing individual needs so she can give good advice on what is a useful feature and what is a waste of time or money.

Her niche is one that almost nobody else wants to occupy. The expertise required in this area is difficult to acquire, and it shuts the door on many of the perceived "cash cows" in the web business world - but for Laura, it opens up possibilities for herself and her clients that provide very real opportunities. Not only is it a tough niche to occupy, but many pros do not want it because there is no profit in telling people that they DON'T need the nifty gadget you just learned how to install! Laura makes her profit from building cost efficient sites for shoestring startups (her overhead is low so she can offer quality at affordable rates), and from producing information on various home business topics.

Life has taken her in an unexpected direction. Some of that direction has hurt, and then benefited her in unlooked for ways. All of the happenstance, strategy, and research that she has done to learn and develop a high level of expertise in helping startup website and business owners in all aspects of developing a successful web presence, combine together to give her a combination of skills which sets her apart from virtually every other web designer in the nation.