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An eCommerce Guide

Understanding the blah blah
and
sorting through the gobbledeegook!

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Please feel free to include any of the above information on your website (acknowledging with an active link back to <http://smartdames.com>).

We are happy for you to share it with whoever you think may benefit from the guidance provided.

What Is Ecommerce?

Ecommerce simply means selling over the Internet — goods, services, information, whatever. Such businesses began in 1995 and are expected by 2007 to generate sales in the USA alone of \$ 105 billion.

How do you get your share of the action?

1. create a website that promotes your products
2. obtain an Internet address
3. hire space on a web-hosting company
4. upload your pages
5. add a payment system, and then
6. use various promotion services to get your site noticed

Building the Website

Websites are collections of HTML pages (graphics as well as text) grouped around some URL (uniform resource locator) like <http://www.blahblahcompany.com>. Websites can be very ambitious, with stunning graphics, animation, sound, database search systems, customer recognition and a good many other features. But they don't need to be. Many successful ecommerce sites are half a dozen pages extolling the virtues of the product. More can be less, and 'wow' sites will only hinder customers getting to your products, and make promotion more difficult.

Your site needs to look professional. How do you create something convincing? You can either:

1. Hire a web design company. Thousands exist, conveniently located online and found using a search engine.
2. Build your own pages using HTML-editing software. Easy-to-use editors exist for all pockets, some of them shareware or even free.
3. Purchase an out-of-the-box shopping cart program that builds the whole site for you, including an online catalogue with payment facilities in place.

4. Rent space on a web-hosting company offering site build online. Much like the out-of-the-box solution, the hosting company gives you templates and wizards to create a distinctive and professional-looking site.

Finding an URL or Internet Domain

The URL (uniform resource locator) is your address or domain on the Internet. You'll want something that identifies your company and possibly your line of business.

How do you get a domain? You visit an online company offering domains for sale. As you're a commercial concern, you'll go for a dot-com, or possibly a dot-biz domain. You'll try possible names in the search box provided until you find a suitable one available and then you take that domain for a few dollars a year. An online credit card facility accepts your order, and an email a few minutes later confirms the purchase. Just as soon as ownership is recorded by the relevant authorities, usually within a couple of days, the domain is yours to go on with to the next stage.

Hosting Your Site

You're halfway there. You have the site built, and a domain name to host it under. Now, if you have built the site yourself, you have to upload it to a web-hosting company that will display it on the Internet, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Thousands of such web-hosting companies exist, and there are now web-hosting directories that enable you to select by cost, platform type, facilities, etc. — all of which are explained by on-site notes. You make your choice of hosting company, click through to their site, pay their hosting fee, and can then upload your site to that company's server. The hosting company will explain how. It's very simple, but you'll need a cheap or free piece of software called an ftp program. This you can obtain from any software supplier, and use it to maintain your site thereafter. Once uploaded, your site goes 'live'. You're on the Internet.

Of course if your site has been built by a web design company, then they'll upload it for you. And if you've built your site online, then all you need do is email the hosting company that you're ready to start trading.

Taking the Money

In selling something you'll want to be paid as quickly, safely and painlessly as possible. Ecommerce now has many options. Starting with the simplest, these are:

1. Display your goods online, but take payment off-line — by check, bank transfer, credit card details given over the phone.
2. Display your goods online and take payment online through some simple wallet system.
3. Display and take payment online, but employ a payment service provider. A link to your shopping cart or catalogue will seamlessly transfer the customer to the payment provider for immediate card processing, transferring the customer back for you to handle the purchase. You can use your online merchant account if you possess one, but that is not required. The payment service provider will verify the credit card purchase, collect the payments, deduct the commissions, and send you the balance, usually by bank transfer monthly.
4. Display and take payment online, but use your own online merchant account, which you have obtained from your local bank or from a Merchant Account Provider.
5. Wondering how to link your site to the payment process? Links will be built in automatically if you use an out-of-the box shopping cart, employ a web design company, or rent space on an online ecommerce-hosting site. Otherwise, if you've built your own site, you'll have to add code to the pages concerned. With payment service providers that's fairly easy: they'll supply a snippet of code for you to paste in. Using your own merchant account, particularly if you're hosting the site on your own server, will require liaison with the credit card processing company, and good programming experience. You'll probably have to employ a professional.

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Promoting Your Site

With hundreds of new ecommerce sites appearing every day on the Internet, it's getting mighty crowded out there. How is your site going to be noticed? By:

- Getting out a press release.
- Featuring in business directories, in online and off-line versions
- Submitting to the search engines, perhaps employing a site optimization company to get a high ranking
- Using the pay-per-click search engines, which charge a few cents to a few dollars for each visitor that clicks through to your site with a particular search phrase
- Signing up other sites as affiliates, paying them a commission on the sales they achieve for you
- Using search engine ads
- Persuading other sites to link to yours, possibly through a reciprocal links directory
- Winning awards for your site
- Offering online competitions, introductory deals and promotions
- Providing free and helpful information on your site
- Advertising off-line in newspapers and specialist magazines

Each ecommerce business is different, of course, and brings further considerations into play.

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Will The Business Be Successful?

Now the vital question.... Having followed these steps faithfully, can you expect your site to be successful?

Possibly, if you're in a particularly favorable position, such as you're the sole suppliers of spare parts for some particular machinery. Or yours is the only restaurant in a popular tourist area. Yes, in those cases, free information may be all you need.

But in all other cases, NO, Ecommerce is not easy.

The early e-business casualties believed otherwise, of course, and there are still many sites, books and e-books that assure you that ecommerce is entirely a matter of following certain procedures. It isn't, and you can readily see why.

- Ecommerce is an extremely crowded marketplace. In many areas you'll need a well-researched strategy backed by a marketing budget
- It's easy to get locked into the wrong goal or business model, as the spectacular dotcom failures discovered
- You've built a site and then thought about promoting it. Wrong. Your site has to be a selling machine, which means, from the very first, designing around some well-honed selling proposition. That in turn calls for careful thought, competitor research and detailed analysis.
- The number of ecommerce products and services is immense, and all are heavily promoted. Without specialist advice you'll make the wrong choice, which is costly in time and money.
- Ecommerce has its own insider knowledge, which sets newcomers at a disadvantage. You need to look beyond the '*How I made a fortune and so can you*' sort of guides, which generally enrich their originators more than partners.

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Disclaimer: This information has been gathered from various sources and the personal experience of the authors. It is not intended as a fool proof means to success but more as a guide to the complexities of the ecommerce marketplace.

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This Guide is produced by SmartDames for the purpose of educating and guiding you through the tangled internet web of Email Marketing. We are happy for you to include it in your own promotional material, as long as an active link back to <http://www.smartdames.com> is given. Please respect our ethics.

Thank you



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