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Guide & Tips

Untangling the web for a better business

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Despite being widely embraced as an excellent communications tool, the rapid rise of the internet has seen some [small businesses](#) left behind as they struggle to harness its full potential.

Why is this? Is the technology to blame or is the problem caused by a lack of resources and practical information on how small businesses can make the internet work for them? This beginners' guide from SmallBusiness.co.uk and Chris Stenning, managing director of UK Online, can help you get started on the road to being a smart online operator.

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Get to grips with jargon

The internet industry is relatively young. The basic jargon is starting to be understood by the man in the street, with inexpensive packages available to meet most home-users' needs, while at the other end of the scale, large companies have specialists to handle their more complex communications demands.

There are some very real [business](#) advantages to be gained from the internet, just by grasping some key terminology and focussing on what's right for your particular business. It's worth taking the time to understand the terminology or ask your supplier what difficult terms mean.

The connectivity basics

Speed and contention— There is the lack of clear information about internet connections themselves. While details of broadband speeds are readily available, other factors such as the effect that 'contention ratios' (the ratio of other people sharing your connection) and the distance a user is from the exchange can have on download and upload speeds are not always made clear by some suppliers.

Look for a high-speed internet service that offers low contention, which means fewer other businesses are using the same service at the same time as you. It's a bit like having your own lane on the motorway.

Usage limits – Choose a supplier and package that offers unlimited usage limits as, although you may only occasionally need it, it is vital to plan for business use – you would not want to hit a download limit or be charged extra for receiving a vital file.

Support - Honestly evaluate your own level of technical expertise, as this will have considerable bearing on how much support you need from a supplier. Consider whether your business depends on being connected to the internet for its day-to-day running. If so, it may be worth considering a supplier that offers round-the-clock support, which should be included in the package with no hidden extra costs.

Developing your online presence

Getting started – First of all, ensure you have domain names that are relevant for your business. Bear in mind that you may need to secure different variants for your company name – for example 'joebloggsbuilders.com' or 'jbbuilders.co.uk' – and you will need to plan ahead to secure names for any sidelines or new markets you may be developing.

Once this is done, take a realistic view of your website development and decide, based on your technical ability, whether you want to build and, most importantly, update the site yourself with an easy to set up and administer template-based service, or whether you need the help of a design agency. Many businesses fall into the trap of getting a fantastic site designed, while lacking the funds or skills to update it regularly.

Maintaining your online presence - Evaluate how critical your website is to your business and consider external hosting options with backed up services to ensure your 'shop front' remains available in the event of any IT problems.

Developing your communications infrastructure

Access to your email & contacts – Management of email as one of the key challenges for business. You need to need to consider whether it's necessary for your business to be connected continuously or just 'as and when'. Do you need to access your email in real time or can it wait? Having access to all contacts can mean you could make that call now rather than later.

Sharing information - If your business is growing, then you may need to share communications data, such as emails, contacts and online calendars, across a number of employees – including those who work remotely. In this instance, it could be worth considering a hosted email service as a stepping-stone to purchasing your own exchange server, which can take a lot of investment in time, money and resources to manage.

Once you've decided what your business needs, you are ready to start choosing the internet package. As with any purchase your choice should be based on your overall needs, rather than simply price.

For more information visit www.ukonline.net

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- I manage very well
- I manage to cope
- Sometimes it's a struggle
- I find it really hard

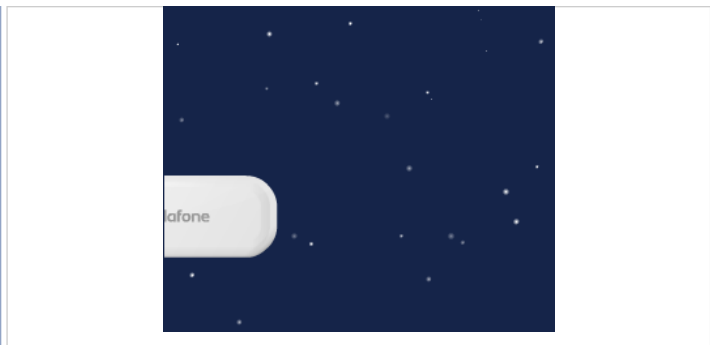


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