



Launching a new online business

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Introduction

Here's your complete guide to starting an online business. This little eBook is packed with everything you need to know about getting a business online, from the idea phase to launch date. There's a lot of information to digest, so we've split it into four manageable sections – your business idea, getting online, marketing, and legal and financial stuff. So, you can either read the book from start to finish or just head to the relevant section depending on where you are in your business journey – it's up to you.

No two entrepreneurs will go through the same process, but everyone starting a business will have to tackle the topics discussed in this book. This guide can help you break the whole process down into practical steps that can help you along the way.

Part 1: Coming up with an idea that works

Developing an idea

Every business starts with an idea. Whether it comes from a hobby you have, work experience or a skill you've built over the years - if you have something to offer people that can help them or enhance their lives, you can turn it into a business.

Let's bust two popular myths about business ideas.

Myth 1: Your business won't be successful unless your idea is a brand-spanking new one that nobody has ever thought of.

There are billions of people on the planet – and more often than not, someone has thought of the same idea as you and already turned it into a business. Here's why this is a good thing - you can learn from the mistakes they may have made and save yourself time and money by not doing the same.

Originality is key, and you can still be original even when creating a business that's already out there. This is where your Unique Selling Point comes into play - rather than coming up with an identical business, you're putting your own spin on it.

Businesses take inspiration from one another all the time. The social media application, Snapchat, has seen huge success from allowing users to create

'stories' by uploading their pictures and videos to a feed that disappears after 24 hours. Instagram shortly followed suit with their own offering named 'Instagram Stories'. Most recently, messaging app WhatsApp added a new 'Status' feature which works very similarly to the Snapchat formula.

Watch and learn from the giants - taking a popular idea and putting your own, original spin on it could be the best thing you've ever done for your small business.

Myth 2: Your product has to be the next best thing...ever

Take a look around the room you're reading this book in right now. How many small, seemingly insignificant things are you surrounded by that you simply couldn't live without? Remember that these were all business ideas that became basic necessities – a winning formula. From the humble nail file to a simple post-it note – these were at some point just business ideas. So no matter how small or silly your idea may seem, remember that it will always have the potential to go far. Even if it's just a local hit rather than a global one, if people are buying it and coming back for more, you're on to a winner.

Part 1: Coming up with an idea that works

Crafting a winning business plan

Start putting a business plan together at the earliest opportunity. It will guide you when running your business and help you make crucial decisions. Your business plan gives the business model structure – it tells other people, and reminds you, of what your business is all about and where you want it to go.

The other reason a business plan is crucial is because you won't be able to secure any funding you might need for your business without one. Banks and investors will pick your business plan apart to make sure you know what you're doing with the money and will be able to pay it back, so it needs to be clear and written impeccably too.

What to include in your business plan

You'll need to start with a complete summary of your business plan – this can be up to 2 whole pages long. The more detail you can go into here, the better. Be sure to include key objectives and goals, and make sure these are attainable and realistic.

You'll also need detailed studies of your competitors to show you've done your research and know the industry you're going into.

Of course, you'll have to include a detailed plan for your sales and marketing and an honest, in-depth financial summary. Also, remember the following points:

- **Make sure it's easy to read** – eliminate jargon from your business plan. Show you know your stuff, but remember you're primarily writing your business plan for you.
- **Show you understand the market** – you can do this with a brief analysis of your sector, competitors, and demographics - and how your business can fit into all of this.
- **Keep it realistic** – especially when it comes to the financial details. However, you can still show your passion and the dreams you have for your business when you speak about your development plan. Don't be afraid to think big!
- **Show your business can appeal to a need or solve a problem** – and don't forget to explain how you're going to do that.

Once the business plan is complete, don't leave it sitting around and collecting dust. Refer back to it every so often to remind yourself of your goals and objectives, especially if you hit a speed bump and need a boost of inspiration.

Part 1: Coming up with an idea that works

Crafting a winning business plan

Remember that you'll need an up-to-date version of your business plan whenever you apply for a new investment too. The plus side of regularly updating your plan is that you can include actual figures your business has amassed and adjust the plan accordingly, plus reviews on performance and how you've implemented what you've learnt since the launch of your business.

Not sure how to structure your business plan? A quick Google search will bring up lots of free business plan templates you can download. [You can find one from gov.co.uk here.](#)

Part 1: Coming up with an idea that works

Testing the market

If there's two things you'll want to save when launching a business, it's time and money – and testing the market before you officially launch your business is essential to help you do this.

When you've spent ages coming up with a business model that you truly believe in, it can be hard to spot the flaws in your vision. Sure, you'll speak to your family and friends about it and get their thoughts, but what you really need is an impartial opinion to show you what you're doing right, and where there's room for improvement.

Friends and family are a good place to start though, because they can put you in touch with people you don't know, who can then test your product and offer their opinions.

Ways you can test

- Hold a small focus group
- Find volunteers on social media
- Use SurveyMonkey to create quick surveys your audience can answer

- Attend industry events where you'll find your target market
- Build a prototype or beta test
- Use Google Trends to see how people are searching for your product or service online
- Monitor your competitors – how are they doing things? What mistakes are they making? Where are they going right?

Remember that it's best practice to keep your testing scale small – that way, any problems you encounter will be easier to rectify. Don't skip on the testing – it's a great way to find out what works and saves you from having to go back and make time-consuming changes to your product or service once you've launched. Testing gives you an idea of how your target market is going to receive your product and allows you to make crucial tweaks and changes before you go live.

Part 2: Getting your business online

Coming up with a good business name and domain

First impressions are everything – and your company name is the first impression customers will have of your business.

Coming up with a name might seem simple, but it's a very important part of launching a business, and a decision that shouldn't be taken lightly. You'll brand your whole business around the name you choose for it, so you'll want to be 100% sure you've picked the right one— changing it later down the line can be a pain once you're established, especially for a small business.

Things to consider

Depending on the type of business you're launching, you might want to go for a conventional name that tells potential customers what you do at a glance (eg. 'West London Plumbers'). A good benefit of a name like this is that it doubles as a term people would type to find a business like yours online, boosting your Google ranking. However, these don't make the most exciting business names in the world.

You could go for a more unconventional name that will evoke curiosity towards your brand, but will still be catchy and memorable, like 'Spotify'. Great for drawing attention to your brand, trickier if the name is totally random and nobody gets it.

No matter what kind of name you go for, it will need to be easy to spell so you can be found in search engines without trouble. The ideal business name is short, snappy and easy to remember. It's also a good idea to do a search of your potential name online to make sure it's not too similar to another business. This could confuse potential customers and possibly even bring you unwanted legal trouble. [Search the trademark section of gov.uk](#) to be sure.

Choosing a domain

Once you've settled on a name for your business, register for the domain as soon as you can. Again, keep it short and simple, and avoid using numbers and other characters that you'd have to explain when giving out your web address out loud.

Part 2: Getting your business online

Coming up with a good business name and domain

Be sure to snap up as many different extensions for your domain as you can, to avoid a competitor with a similar name getting there first. .com needs no introduction – it's one of the most popular domain extensions out there, but availability is low, meaning that chances are whatever you're trying to register will already be taken. Don't stress if you can't get one, as there are plenty of other domain extensions out there that can work just as well for your business.

- [.uk or .co.uk](#) – Perfect for UK based businesses. You can let customers know that you're a reputable trader in the UK at a glance.
- [Location based extensions](#) – eg .london if you want to be really specific! Bear in mind that this could be limiting if you have global dreams for your business.
- [.co or .net](#) – Great .com alternatives with good availability
- [.org or .or.uk](#) – Good choice of domain for not-for-profit businesses
- [Industry specific](#) – eg. .shop or .blog, brilliant for targeting specific audiences.

Devote a good amount of time thinking about your business name. And even if it sounds funny or strange, believe in it. Think Mozilla Firefox, Skype, Hulu and even Google. Bet those names all sounded pretty funny at first - but the success of their businesses are no laughing matter.

Once you're sure about the name you want, try [running a search of it on 123 Reg](#) to check it hasn't already been registered, and then snap it up with as many extensions as you can, before anyone else can get their hands on it.

Part 2: Getting your business online

Building your website

You've got a business name and the domain to match. Now what?

It's time to get your business online, and it's easier than it used to be to have a fully-functioning, professional looking website at your fingertips without breaking the bank.

Why do I need a website for my business?

Chances are when you're looking for a product or service the first thing you do is an online search. Your potential customers are no different so if you want your business to be found, you need to get online. A website is also a cheap and efficient way to promote your business and communicate with visitors from all over the world. Customers have access to your business 24/7, allowing you to make money around the clock.

Creating your website

Keep costs down by building your website yourself. It's easy! WordPress is always a great option for DIY website building, as its feature rich and beginner friendly. Just pick a theme and get going. Not sure you'll have the time to do that?

There's also the [Make Me a Website service from 123 Reg](#), where you simply rattle off a list of visions for your website to our experts, and they get to work creating it for you.

An even easier and quicker option is a website building tool. They tend to come at pocket-friendly prices and are very easy to use in most cases. The 123 Reg Website Builder is a good option because it allows you to create a professional website from scratch using expertly designed templates and drag-and-drop tools. It's simple and inexpensive, but you'll undoubtedly be pleased with the results.

In the spirit of building a professional web presence, the Website Builder package also comes with a personalised email address, which means you can match your domain name to your email address instead of having customers contact you via a Hotmail/Yahoo account, which doesn't scream professional business! However you decide to build your site, personalised email is a must.

Part 2: Getting your business online

Building your website

If you want a more hands-on approach to your building your site and know your way around some coding languages, you could purchase a web hosting package and build your site from scratch. [123 Reg Web Hosting](#) comes with access to many free applications like WordPress and ecommerce software so you can easily add blogs and e-shops to your site. Going for web hosting means you will also have to consider the size of the website you're building and the amount of bandwidth you'll need to find the perfect hosting package.

Images and design

The website you create for your business needs to be visually appealing or your visitors won't want to stick around for long. The images are what is going to catch your visitors' eyes, so spend some time making sure you get these right.

Remember:

- Always use sharp, high-quality images to give customers the best impression of your business
- Try to avoid generic, overused images – you want your images to set your business apart from others

- Don't skip ALT tags when uploading images to your website, as these affect SEO (more on that later)
- Save money by taking your own, original photos for your website

The design of your website speaks for the business. For example, a sloppy design says "sloppy business" loud and clear. You don't need to be a professional web designer, but you do need to remember to:

Avoid a cluttered web page

You should be guiding your user's journey on your website from start to finish. Remove unnecessary distractions from your page and remember you don't need to fill every gap with something - white space on a webpage allows viewers to focus on what you want them to see. Stick to one or two call-to-actions so the user has a clear idea of what they should do next on your site.

Is all the content on your homepage necessary? Make sure that what you sell, how the customer can purchase it and how much it costs is crystal clear.

Part 2: Getting your business online

Building your website

It's frustrating for a user to log on to a website and not have access to this information straight away. Make sure your customers can navigate from page to page of your website with ease, and check that all links are working.

Simplify colours and fonts

As tempting as it might be to use lots of different colours for an eye-catching effect, it's better to stick to a simple colour scheme for a clean, professional look. Too many colours can also lead to unsightly clashes and a garish, chaotic look. Instead, opt for colours that complement each other. Speaking of clashes - It's also a good idea to stick to just two or three fonts, used for different effects that complement each other. Like colours, not all fonts will work well together and not all fonts will look good, so bear this in mind.

Avoid blocks of text

Think about the most simple and effective way you can make your point. It may be tempting to provide paragraphs upon paragraphs of information on your website – after all, you're excited about your business and you want to give your visitors as much information as possible. But blocks of text are a major put off and unlikely to be read anyway, making it a waste of your time and effort.

Try to cut the information down into what is essential, and split the text into paragraphs grouped by headings and sub-headings. Differentiate the extra important information your customers need to see with bold text to grab attention.

Visitors to your website should be able to scan your page briefly and still get the information they need.

Don't forget your mobile design

It's vital that your website is mobile-friendly. Your Google ranking could suffer if it's not, and you could be missing out on a lot of customers, with so many people accessing the internet through mobile devices these days. Most site-building software like WordPress or even the 123 Reg Website Builder use mobile-ready themes and templates, so there's no excuse. If you're building your site from scratch, don't neglect your mobile audience – it's likely to be huge!

Stay up to date

Keep your website fresh and exciting with seasonal design. The seasons are a great way to make money by catching eager shoppers and enticing them with promotional offers.

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Building your website

Christmas, Halloween, Valentine's Day, Easter, Back to School – the list goes on. Don't go overboard – add a coating of snow to your logo for Christmas or a few love hearts around your page for Valentine's Day to get your customers in the spirit.

Copywriting

Thoroughly proofread anything written for your website – grammatical and spelling errors won't do any good for your reputation. Careless mistakes will make your business look unprofessional and amateur – exactly what you don't want.

Establish a strong brand voice for your business – do you want to be informal and chatty or corporate and serious? Language is the tool you have to inject some personality into your brand – so use it wisely! Even if you are going for the more corporate tone of voice, you can still use descriptive language to make an impact – make it fun and exciting for your customers to read.

A tip on call to actions – keep them clear and descriptive. After all, they need to encourage your visitors to click that button or link. Tell them what's in it for them if they click – 'Learn more', 'Get your discount', or 'Start your free trial' work so much better than a bland and uninformative 'click here'.

It's important that your website visitors know what to expect once they click your call to action.

Security

Once you've got your website up and running, you'll need to think about keeping it secure for the sake of your business and your customers. What a shame it would be to have your beautiful new website hacked by scammers or plagued by spam. Here are some things you should consider to keep your site secure as can be:

SSL certificate – Essential, especially if you're running an ecommerce business or processing payments through your website. An SSL certificate will reassure customers that their transactions on your site will be secure, building trust in your business. Google also favours secure websites, so you'll see a boost in your search engine ranking. The opposite will happen without an SSL and Google will alert visitors to your site that it is 'Not Secure'.

Domain Privacy – Crucial and inexpensive, domain privacy is a must if you want to avoid an inbox saturated with spam or even worse, being a victim of identity fraud.

Part 2: Getting your business online

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When you register a domain name, your personal details including your telephone number, address, email address and business details are published to the WHOIS database, which is available to anyone on the web.

So if you register a domain name without purchasing domain privacy, you'll more than likely notice an increase in spam to your mailbox. Domain privacy replaces your personal details with generic information so your information is protected.

Antivirus and malware protection – A must-have. Invest in some high-quality anti-virus software and always keep it up to date to avoid catching any pesky viruses. Malware is another thing you'll want to protect your website from, and with 110 million variants of malware floating around the web today, you can't take any chances. SiteLock from 123 Reg is great malware protection that can scan your site for malware and vulnerabilities, plus fix and prevent any further instances.

Keeping your website on top form

Making your business website is only the start. You'll have to keep updating it to make sure that you are always maximising your chances to make sales.

Tools like Google Analytics can help you monitor your site and its visitors to help you make improvements.

You'll:

- Find out who your website visitors are, where they're visiting from, what devices they used to see your site and much more
- See who are first-time visitors and who is returning
- See how long a visitor was on your site, and how long they stayed on each page
- Find out how your visitors are finding your site (eg. search engine, social link)

This information can help you make improvements to your website by showing you what's working for your visitors and what isn't. Another way to make sure your website is being received well is to create polls and surveys and reach out to your visitors, asking them for feedback.

Part 3: Marketing your online business

Developing an online marketing plan

Marketing is a crucial part of starting an online business. It's how you introduce the world to your brand and get your name out there. It's not easy, and there is no guaranteed formula or fast-track to success. It's all about how well you know your target market, and how you can cater to their needs to produce sales.

There are four very important marketing techniques you'll need to get your head around to create a solid marketing plan, and once you know the basics of each one, you can decide when to implement them in order to bring you the best results.

An introduction to the biggest online marketing techniques

SEO

SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) is one of the most important marketing techniques we'll discuss in this book. SEO ensures that your business appears in search engine results, and this is very important because a large amount of your business will come from online searches. There's a lot to take into account when optimising your website for search engines, and it's an ongoing process of consistently checking everything on your page to make sure that you are always maximising your chances of being found easily on the web.

How can you maximise your chances? In a nutshell:

- **Relevance of your content** – providing the information that the user is searching for
- **Site performance** – making sure your site works properly and loads quickly
- **User experience** – making sure your site is easy to navigate, a high bounce rate indicates it may not be
- **Authority** – making sure your content is useful enough to be linked to and from other authorities sites

Refining your SEO strategy can help you achieve these things. Do a review of your site and ask yourself these questions.

How easy is it to navigate your site?

If it's difficult, this can affect your Google ranking. Check all links, menus and call to actions are accurate and working properly.

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How long do users stay on your site?

Guess what – the amount of time people spend on your site can affect your Google ranking. If your page loading speeds are too slow, or there is not enough useful content on your site, users will get frustrated and leave. Again, menus that are not clear and links that do not work can contribute to your bounce rate (the percentage of visitors who leave the site after only viewing one page).

Have you included ALT-tags in your images?

Whenever you upload an image, you have an opportunity to include keywords that can boost your ranking. Just a few words describing what the picture is can make all the difference, so be sure to include them on every image on your site.

How readable is your content?

Big chunks of writing signal bad readability. Text broken up into paragraphs, separated with headers and sub-headers can work wonders for improving your site's readability and in turn – your search engine ranking.

Is your site mobile –friendly?

If it isn't, your Google ranking can seriously suffer. As of 2015, Google began to penalise every site that isn't mobile optimised with a drop in ranking, as with so many sites being visited through mobile devices, this can affect user experience.

How are you using your links?

Links are analysed by engines to determine the trustworthy factor of your site. If you're linking to high-quality content on your page – and even better, if you can get a trusted and popular site to link to your page, it shows search engines that your website is unlikely to be spam.

Building up these kind of links can be a daunting prospect for a new business, but it can be done. Here are some tips to get you started:

- **Acquire links organically** – focus on creating and promoting great content, and you may find other sites naturally want to link to your website.
- **Reach out to influencers** – just a simple email to a relevant influencer in your field, asking them to check out your website and link to it if they like it can work wonders.

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- **Utilise your connections** – family, friends, and business partners – the more people you can get to link to your content, the better. You could even offer incentives such as freebies or discounts.
- **Add a content-rich blog to your website** – a great way to earn organic links as you'll be consistently producing fresh, new content.
- **Using social media** – it will help you build a network of followers who will want to share your content. Search engines will pick up on your business name being mentioned.

Avoid buying links – it's not the best option as you could suffer a penalty if you are caught, especially if you are buying them in bulk.

Anchor text linking to your own content should always be descriptive and use keywords, but you should keep it varied – repeating the same anchor text over and over again could bring up a red flag for search engines.

Are you using keywords properly?

Keywords are crucial for SEO as search engines scan through the content on your page to decipher what it's about.

When you understand what words and phrases a user will type into a search engine in order to find a business like yours, and then use them in your text, you are creating 'keywords'. But search engines are advanced and can tell the difference between text that is natural and text that is stuffed with keywords purely to boost your ranking, so repeatedly using the same keywords throughout your text will not fast track you to the top of the search results – in fact, it will more than likely get you omitted from them. When it comes to keywords that help you rank, if you're writing informative text relevant to what you do, your text will contain them anyway. Focus on writing content that is enjoyable for your website visitors to read.

There's a lot to remember about keeping your website optimised for search engines and to be truly effective your site needs to be monitored consistently. That's why some people may turn to agencies that specialise in SEO services. However, this can be costly, and as a new online business you might want to consider a cheaper DIY option – for example, [the 123 Reg Search Engine Optimiser](#), which does everything an SEO agency can do for you at the fraction of the cost, and doesn't require you to have any SEO knowledge or experience.

Part 3: Marketing your online business

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PPC

Pay-per-click advertising (PPC) is a marketing strategy that allows you to use paid advertising to target and drive specific audiences to your website.

How it works

Let's say you want to create an advertisement and have it appear at the top of Google's search results, in the paid ad section. You can use an advertising service like Google AdWords and pay to get this done. You'll create an account and then a campaign, where you'll need to determine the keywords people will search to find the kind of product or service you offer – for example, “East London Mechanic”. Then you'll create an ad that will appear in the Sponsored section when people search on Google using these words or phrases, like “Mechanic services in East London”.

This works as a fast-track as you'd have to wait a lot longer to show up in the search results as a new online business. When it comes to pricing, you decide how much you are willing to pay (by bidding) when your ad is clicked, and you only pay if it is. However, how high up in the search you appear depends on the amount you bid.

Remember that there are other businesses you will be bidding against. The keywords you choose determine how much you'll need to bid too – competition is fierce for the popular words so you'll need to be prepared to bid high for the ones you need.

Why use PPC?

Rather than just attracting anyone and everyone to your business, you can target and drive people who are actually interested in your business straight to your website, hopefully converting them into sales. This is because you are targeting people who are searching on Google using keywords that are relevant to your business.

What makes a successful PPC campaign?

Choosing the right keywords – Research the keywords relevant to your business – PPC campaigns are built on keywords so this is really important. And keywords don't stop at what you want customers to search and find you - apply negative keywords to your campaign too. These are keywords you set that will ensure your ad does not show up when these are searched – allowing you to ensure you are only coming up in relevant searches to your business and attracting the right audiences.

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Product-specific landing pages – Rather than directing customers from your ad to your website homepage, create landing pages for each product you offer and use a matching ad campaign to direct them to exactly what they need, and what you want them to do.

Tracking and monitoring results – You need to track the performance of your ads so you can see what keywords are driving traffic and continue to use those while cutting the ones that aren't out of your campaign. How regularly you track and monitor is important too. Rather than checking daily, give your campaigns time to grow so you can make informed decisions on what is working and what isn't.

Pay-per-click advertising is a great marketing strategy that has to be executed carefully and in a strategic way. If this isn't something you feel you can devote your time to, it might be worth trying [123 Reg Pay-Per-Click Ads](#). That way, you can reap the rewards of a successful PPC campaign without having to lift a finger.

Social Media

Social media is undoubtedly one of the easiest and cheapest ways to promote your business and engage with your target market. Having a strong social media presence can work wonders for your business by allowing you to build a reputation and a following for your brand. Like every other marketing strategy we've discussed so far, social media success requires patience and persistence as you build and grow your brand. It's important not to let low follower counts and shares discourage you in the early stages – remember that social media gives your business a platform and an opportunity to target and reach people interested in what you have to offer all over the world. With some dedication and consistency, you will see your numbers grow.

Picking your platform

With so many social media channels to choose from, it's important to pick the right one for your business. Naturally, you'll want to get started with about two or three different accounts so you can ensure you are reaching as much of your target audience as possible, but still be able to manage your accounts with ease. Pick the platforms with the best features to help you promote your business.

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And remember – there’s no point in posting on Pinterest all day if the majority of your target market is actually on Instagram. Find the social media channels the majority of your target market are using and make sure you’re on there too.

Here’s a quick breakdown of the three biggest channels and ideas on how you can use them.

Facebook

Best suited for: pretty much any type of business.

How you can use it: Customer service and complaint handling, posting video and image content, building a community, displaying reviews, hosting live broadcasts.

Twitter

Best suited for: any type of business.

How you can use it: Quick interactions with customers, customer service and complaint handling, posting image and video content, live broadcasting (via Periscope), pushing content using hashtags, creating a strong brand identity.

Instagram

Best suited for: A business selling physical products or wanting to display the quality of their work through photos and videos - .eg. Florists, make-up artists, bakeries

How you can use it: Photo and video sharing, live broadcasting, as an online portfolio, pushing content using hashtags, using images to speak for your brand.

Planning your content

Make a plan of things you want to post and when, before you even create your account. There are so many ways a business can use social media, from building your brand and customer relations, to providing customer service and generating sales. Once you have a clear goal set it will be easier to decide the kind of content you want on your page.

Then – research your target audience. Everything you post will have to be tailored to their interests, so you’ll need to know who they are. Try looking at your competitors’ social media pages and make a note of the kind of content they post and what engages their followers.

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It's important to stay up to date with what people are talking about on social media and constantly be on the lookout for material you can post. You want to post engaging content that your followers will want to share, so you can get your business name out there. Hashtags are one of the quickest ways to find out what topics are being spoken about and the questions people are asking. Check out the trending topics each day and chime in on the relevant ones to your business.

Video content is a must-have for boosting engagement rates: [4 times as many consumers would rather watch a video about a product than read about it, and 1 in 4 consumers are likely to lose interest in a company if it doesn't have video.](#)

It's worth noting that everything you post doesn't need to be serious or business oriented all the time. People use social media for entertainment and to fill gaps when they are bored. Lighten up the mood with a funny or light-hearted post when you can – people will love to share it with their followers.

Boosting your presence

Even if your numbers don't rise straight away, keep in mind that when it comes to followers it's the quality, not quantity that matters. Your business is much better off with 30 followers that engage with your posts and are interested in your products, than 300 who really couldn't give a toss what you sell. The latter won't convert into customers, which is what really matters.

Having said that, you still want to put some energy into doing what you can to boost your social media presence and gain some followers to your account. This can be done by making sure all your profiles are well branded and complete with all the necessary information about your business, so people know who you are. Get a good logo designed so you can be instantly recognisable. Use hashtags – they are a godsend for drawing attention to your brand. Tag your posts with relevant hashtags so they are more likely to be seen by people interested in the topic, and search hashtags and reach out to people asking questions or making comments you can answer.

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Research your audience and post things that people will actually want to share. Use your social media page as a place to connect with your followers. Have conversations and offer guidance and advice rather than using it purely as a sales tool. Social media gives you an amazing opportunity to build relationships with customers you wouldn't normally come across, so take advantage of that. You can also use it as a free focus group - create polls and quizzes so you can find out the opinions of the people that are following you, and use the results to provide better content and products to them.

Everyone loves free stuff – so giveaways, freebies and competitions are a sure-fire way to get your small business some well-deserved attention on social media. You could offer incentives for sharing or retweeting your posts, which will boost your profile and introduce more people to your brand. Giveaways and freebies don't always have to be expensive either – it's the little things that people appreciate.

Give customers an insight into your working environment – host a live broadcast from your office, for example. You need to show off the personality of your brand so customers know what to expect when they approach you.

Get involved in local causes and events and offer your support- show your customers who you are and what you stand for as a brand.

Networking is key to climbing the social media ranks. Research your influencers – these are people in your field with a lot of reach. They often have high follower counts and high engagement rates. A retweet, share or mention from an influencer can give your profile a significant boost. When you find your influencers, reach out to them. Get their attention by engaging with their content. Sometimes you can offer them incentives to share your own content. It may not always work – but it is certainly worth a try.

Don't forget to monitor your social media stats so you can see what posts your audience are engaging with and give them more of the same. Most social media business accounts come with a built in 'insights' features where you can view basic stats on your audience interactions. For a more in-depth look at what's really driving traffic, we highly recommend Google Analytics.

Part 3: Marketing your online business

Developing an online marketing plan

Managing your social media accounts

You need to be on the ball 24/7 when it comes to running a successful social media page. Understandably, that this isn't always possible. Luckily there are ways you can make managing your accounts easier, so you can focus on other areas of your business.

A popular option to use is automated posts as it allows you to be consistent, even when you can't be there. It also allows you to plan posts that are time-sensitive, like product releases or sales announcements. Scheduling the post of a quick video or photo is a great way to save time. However, avoid automating anything and everything you can – customers appreciate human interaction, and you'll need to be around after some posts to ensure you can respond to customers comments relating to the post. Automating interactions with customers such as replies to questions and comments can spell disaster when the response is obviously automated.

Another good idea is to create a calendar for the month with all the content you are planning to post clearly mapped out. That way, you don't risk running a blank halfway through the month and you don't lose focus. Try Google Docs or Trello to create a post calendar and organise your content plans.

Hootsuite and Tweetdeck are popular tools you can use to schedule posts. Another good one is Buffer - the paid version also gives you insights into your post performance and also allows you to create a calendar for your scheduled posts.

Using social media to make sales

The biggest social media platforms offer paid ads and promotional services to help target your content to the people you really want to see it. If you can afford to do this, it's a great way to boost traffic and sales and should certainly pay off. 123 Reg Online Business Training has a whole free, in-depth course devoted to teaching you all the ins and outs of social media advertising, focusing on Facebook and Twitter, so if you are interested in this option be sure to check that out.

Part 3: Marketing your online business

Developing an online marketing plan

Email Marketing

So you have a list of customers and potential customers that have opted in to receive email communications from you. That's great! Now you need to focus on nurturing those relationships as you now have an excellent platform for converting sales.

Email marketing can be tricky – timing is everything. It's up to the customer whether they choose to even open your email or not, so sending them at the right time is crucial. How often you email them is important too – too often and they'll be running for the hills. All it takes is a click of an unsubscribe link to lose a lead for good. But don't email often enough and they'll forget all about you! So how do you tackle email marketing?

It's important to tailor your messages to specific customers, giving them a more personal experience. This is done by using audience segmentation – which simply means you divide your audience up into groups such as gender, age, location and purchase history and send each group an email that really matters to them, rather than sending out the same email to everyone at once and risking sending certain people something totally irrelevant.

Personalisation is a must – “Dear Customer” is simply not good enough in this day and age, when any decent email marketing tool should allow you to email each customer by name with ease. Email marketing is your opportunity to show your customers how much you value them.

Subject lines are crucial – it needs to entice the recipient to actually open the email. But avoid using trick tactics such as overpromising or exaggerating in the subject line – you'll only leave the reader frustrated when they discover that what they were hoping to find is not in the email.

Scheduling is important to ensure the customer knows when they are going to be hearing from you. Let customers know they'll be receiving a weekly newsletter or a monthly update and stick to this timeframe – it's just not credible for a business to not stick to its word.

Sales and deals lose value if they are too regular – so emailing your customers every week with a new offer is not enticing or exciting for them. A big deal every once in a while is more likely to get opened than the same offer every week.

Part 3: Marketing your online business

Developing an online marketing plan

Measure the results of your email campaigns – we recommend Google Analytics to do this. You'll see what emails are being opened and converting sales, and this is how you can be sure of what campaigns are working and do more of the same. It's a lot to think about, so you'll more than likely need to invest in a good email marketing tool to help you manage. [Email Marketing from 123 Reg](#) allows you to do all of the things discussed and more, plus creating a professional email campaign is made simple thanks to drag-and-drop the interface.

Understanding your website visitors

In order to get the most out of your marketing strategy, you need to understand your website visitors and what drives them to your content, so you can continue to produce that and scrap what doesn't work. Without this understanding, you'll never know how to produce the best results to maximise sales.

Knowing where your website visitors are coming from, what devices they're using and what they are actually doing on your website is key, because it will help you to meet their needs as you improve your site.

123 Reg Online Business Training [contains a free course dedicated to teaching you how to understand your website visitors and their behaviour](#). It makes using a tool like Google Analytics a lot easier when you understand exactly what you are looking for.

Part 4: Financial & legal things to think about

Thinking about the financial and legal side of running your business is not always fun, but it's absolutely necessary to ensure you're covered from all angles and won't find yourself in any hot water once you launch – a nightmare for a new business.

Funding your business

This is something every business owner needs to think about carefully, especially if you don't have your own money to start up with. There are a few options we'll briefly cover now:

- **Bank loan** – Not easy to get, but if you can get approved you'll have lower interest rates and longer repayment periods to play with.
- **Business overdraft/credit card** – A great way to get the quick cash you need for your business, but you risk spending more than you can afford to pay back.
- **Crowdfunding** – You'll save time and money without having to go through a drawn-out application process, but you may not be able to get a large amount of funding from this option.
- **Angel investor** – You'd have to give up a share of your business if you win an investment, but you'll also have the guidance of an experienced entrepreneur and you won't have to pay all the money back if you fail.
- **Micro-loan** – Easier to get than a bank loan, but if you need a large amount of funding this wouldn't be the best option to go for.
- **Grant** – Hard to find and even harder to apply for, but if you can get one you'll be given the funds for your business.
- **Bootstrapping** – essentially the business pays for itself here, and you reinvest as it grows -which is great as you own 100% of it. However, if the business doesn't make money, neither do you.

Part 4: Financial & legal things to think about

Managing your money

However you choose to finance your business, you'll need to be able to efficiently manage the money coming in as you grow your business. Sometimes it can pay off to hire an expert who can analyse your data and help you make financial decisions.

As far as what you can do for yourself, firstly it goes without saying that you need to cut costs to make sure you have as much money as possible for your business. It might be tempting to go all out with an SEO expert or expensive web designer, but when you're just starting out it is best practice to whatever you can yourself. The money you don't spend on hiring someone to do something you can do yourself can be spent on valuable improvements on your business.

Familiarise yourself with financial statements. This can all be confusing, especially if you're not great with numbers, but these statements will tell you all you need to know about the cash flow of your business. Like with most of the other practices that we have discussed in this book, monitoring results is key.

Comparing financial statements can hold the key to you knowing what works and what doesn't for your business.

Part 4: Financial & legal things to think about

Legal stuff

It's advisable to seek out some legal advice before starting your business. If anything goes wrong, it's important to have your back covered so you can avoid fallouts and delays.

Plus, showing your bank or potential lender that you have considered possible risks and downsides can show them your business plan is credible and that they can invest in you. A legal professional can advise you further, but here are some things that are often overlooked that would be good to remember:

- **What kind of company you will be** – you can do business as a sole trader, working as self-employed or as a limited company owned by shareholders. Both have their pros and cons, so do your research and decide which option suits your needs the best.
- **Website comments** – you could be liable for comments posted on your website, especially if they are posted by an anonymous person. Moderate comments left on your website and remove anything that could cause offence.
- **Data protection** – online shoppers need to know what is done with their data, if it will be transferred to third parties and what their rights are as a customer.

You can outline these concerns in a detailed privacy policy.

- **Contract laws** – every business will have contracts it operates by, and you need to fully understand them and have knowledge of the basics of contract law.
- **Cookie Policy** – You'll need to provide everyone that visits your website with clear information about the cookies being used, and get their consent to the storage and reading of cookies on their device.
- **Supplier Identification** - If you're selling online, you are legally required to disclose your identity to your customers. This includes your full name, registered address, contact details such as your telephone number and your VAT number.

Free legal advice

If your budget won't stretch to advice from a legal professional, you can check

Conclusion

out www.gov.uk or contact your local Citizens Advice Bureau for free legal advice. You now have all the information you need to guide you on your journey to setting up a new online business. Let's sum it all up:

- Brainstorm your business idea. Have confidence in it no matter how silly it seems – it could be a winner.
- Write up a detailed business plan as soon as you have an idea. Keep this updated regularly
- Seek out some legal advice and look for sources of funding
- Test your market before going live with your business idea – you can catch any problems and rectify them before releasing your business to the public
- Decide on a clear and memorable business name, then find your domain
- Take the first step to building an online presence by creating a website. Refine your design and copywriting, and secure your site against attacks and viruses
- Develop a marketing plan – it should consist of a mix of SEO, social media, PPC and email marketing

- Monitor the results of every step you take, so you know what to do next

In most cases, it won't happen overnight, but with a solid plan of action, you could be running your very own successful online business in no time. If you have any questions about setting up your own business, 123 Reg is always here to help. Just get in touch via [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).