UK2

A Roadmap for Getting Your Business Online

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In this digital age it's fast becoming essential for businesses of all types to have an online presence. Irrespective of your business's sector, target market or business model, a carefully crafted presence on the internet has become a prerequisite for gaining crucial exposure and remaining competitive.

To the uninitiated, however, the world of websites – and all that it entails – can appear overwhelming, or, at the very least, formidable. Business owners are required to consider branding, content, and functionality alongside more technical subjects such as domain extensions and web hosting. There's a lot to consider – and, frankly, all of it matters.

Thankfully, getting your business online has never been easier. With an array of helpful tools and guides available, small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) are often just handful of steps away from projecting their brand to the world.

That said, there is still a range of decisions that every entrepreneur and business owner must consider before taking their business online. It's a delicate process that must be approached strategically and methodically, and with an eye firmly fixed on the long-term future of the business. In this document, we take you through the five key steps to getting your business online in a straightforward and effective manner. We offer a step-by-step outline of everything from constructing the right brand to selecting the hosting plan that's right for your business needs. By following these steps, you can create a fully functional and optimised website capable of helping you realise your long-term commercial goals.

1. Create your brand

The first stage in the process of taking your business *online* is one that's largely conducted *offline*. Crafting a coherent and consistent brand is critical for defining an identity and establishing a cohesive narrative that is unique to your business.

Deciding how to brand your business online relies on a range of factors, starting with understanding your business's identity, story, and its appeal to audiences. What does your company excel at? What are its values? And where can it outperform competitors?

A successful brand must above all remain consistent. A productive place to begin is to create a brand mission statement that outlines your values and who you're trying to reach. Be sure to consult all of the business's key stakeholders as well as the research you've conducted into your competitors and target audience(s). What you're trying to determine is how your business stands out from its competitors. What is it that you, alone, can offer? What do you do better than everyone else in the market?

These questions should inform your branding process by giving insight into what makes your business unique – and what gives it its character. It's then up to you and other key stakeholders to settle on a name and logo that reflects your brand values, your business's story, and your unique offering and position in the market.

Case study:

With its classic "swoosh" logo, Nike is one of the world's most widely-recognised brands. But behind the renowned tick, Nike's branding goes much deeper. The company's brand mission is: "To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world". It's precisely this mission statement that informs Nike's branding decisions and strategy.

2. Choosing the right domain name

Once you've crafted your brand and settled on a name, the logical next step is to find the right domain name.

When it comes to selecting a domain name for your business, one of the biggest decisions is whether to go with one that's "branded" or "keyword-rich". This is an important question, and one that will have implications for your broader marketing strategy.

Branded domains

Examples of branded domains are Nike, Expedia, and Amazon. These types of domains don't inherently tell you what the business does, but instead simply project the brand name. The principal advantage of the branded-domain route is the development of brand awareness over the long term. These types of domains can also lead to enhanced credibility by giving users reassurance that your business is a legitimate enterprise with a consistent brand and message.

The brand-domain option is worth considering if you are looking to develop a long-term strategy and to build brand awareness over time. Something else to consider here is flexibility: branded domains allow for diversification and shifts in your business's strategy over time.

Keyword-rich domains

Conversely, keyword-rich domains are descriptive and relevant to particular industries. They contain primary keywords that you're aiming to rank for in search engines. In this sense, they seek to target specific niche audiences looking for a certain product or service. For instance, if your business sells cheap plane tickets, your perfect keyword domain would be something along the lines of cheapflights.com. The advantage of keyword-rich domains is that they tell users exactly what it is you do, or what service you provide, or even where you're located.

Keyword-rich domains reached peak-popularity when search engines prioritised domains containing one or more of the keywords being searched for. Today, however, search engines do not favour keyword domains over branded domains.

Check to see if your ideal domain name is available

3. Picking the right domain extension

Once you've decided whether to opt for a branded or keyword-rich domain, the next step is to find the right domain extension.

Once a straightforward task, the act of selecting the right domain extension has grown in complexity thanks to the recent explosion in generic top-level domains (gTLDs).

Today, businesses are no longer restricted to traditional top-level domains like ".com". Rather, there are now more than 1,800 gTLDs and 255 country code TLDs to pick from. This diversity in domain extensions provides new businesses with a range of opportunities to find domain names that reflect their branding and incorporate their unique name.

Country code TLDs

However, increased choice brings more potential pitfalls, and businesses must think carefully before moving away from the .com orthodoxy. Take, for instance, the use of country code TLDs (.es, .fr, .uk, etc.). It's important to consider your long-term objectives when selecting a country-specific domain extension so as to avoid restricting your business to a specific jurisdiction or territory.

> Example:
>
> Luxurytravel.uk – **restrictive domain**
>
> Luxurytravel.eu – flexible domain
>
> Luxurytravel.com – ultimate flexibility

gTLDs

Generic top-level domains also present new opportunities and potential pitfalls. Making use of newer gTLDs can allow you to secure a domain that reflects your business's brand and name (this is particularly important if you have selected a keyword-rich domain).

However, in opting for a more obscure gTLDs – for example .buy, .fun, or .dental – you risk deterring potential visitors. Although Google doesn't discriminate against newer, more obscure domain extensions, users sometimes can. Some visitors may view sites that employ unfamiliar extensions as potentially untrustworthy, or lacking cache. That said, over time, this should become less and less of a problem as internet users become increasingly familiar with the new gTLDs now available. Ultimately, if it means getting the domain name you want – one that reflects your brand and incorporates your name – then opting for a gTLD extension could be the right decision.

4. Hosting solutions

When a website is created, it also has to be hosted. This is the process of making each page on the site publicly accessible over the internet, enabling anyone to enter the web address and view its contents.

In practice, web hosting involves renting out plots of server space where your files and data will be physically stored. There is a wide variety of hosting solutions available, and your decision on which one to select will be based largely on the amount of server space you'll need to store your website's files.

Shared hosting

The most common hosting solution is shared hosting. This option has the advantage of greatly reducing costs insofar as it involves placing hundreds of websites onto one powerful server. This type of arrangement is ideal for blogs, brochures, and websites that aren't expected to generate a significant amount of traffic. With this is in mind, shared hosting is ideal for new businesses seeking to build a presence online.

Sharing hosting space does, however, bring with it a significant drawback. The resources of a server are, of course, finite, meaning that a surge in usage on one website on the server can adversely affect the other tenants.

Dedicated server

Dedicated hosting involves exclusively renting a physical server from a hosting company. As the most complete hosting solution available, dedicated hosting allows for higher performance while giving you more control and the freedom to tailor the server to your business's needs.

Leasing a dedicated server is the most expensive of the three major hosting solutions available. It's something to consider only if you're expecting high volumes of website traffic.

Virtual Private Servers

Virtual private servers (VPS) are best thought of as a blend of shared and dedicated hosting. A VPS shares a physical server but is allocated a portion of the computing resources. Users have access to the virtual server's operating system, allowing them to configure the VPS to their unique requirements.

VPS offers the cost benefits of shared hosting with the control of dedicated hosting. With this in mind, it's the perfect solution for businesses that are looking for the flexibility of a dedicated server but without the attendant costs.

5. Website design, build, and security

Once you've created your brand identity, and chosen your domain name, extension and hosting solution, you're ready to build the website itself. This stage in the process requires careful planning and a strategic mindset. It's vital that you don't undermine any of the wins you've made in the aforementioned steps. Here, you'll consider the build and design of the site, your website's content, functionality, SEO and security.

Template vs. custom web design

When it comes to designing a website, there are two leading options to pick from: template development and custom web design.

Template development typically involves building a website through a system like WordPress – an open-source content management system that powers as much as 30% of the web. Building a website through WordPress is a simple and cost-effective process. Users can select from a multitude of themes and plugins to create a fully-functional website in a relatively short space of time. Themes can be easily found, downloaded, and installed, and there are plenty of guides available to help you through the installation process.

Although your WordPress template could be used by other businesses, unique branding and content can differentiate your site from others. What's more, WordPress carries thousands of themes and plugins, allowing for relatively high levels of customisation.

Custom design, by contrast, involves building a one-of-a-kind website from scratch. This gives you maximum flexibility and allows for unlimited creative freedom. You'll be able to rest assured that your website is unique and perfectly tailored to your business needs. It should be said, however, that custom web development comes with a significant price tag

and takes longer to complete. That is the trade-off for having a unique and fully-customised website that is scalable and tailored your requirements.

Functionality

Regardless of whether you take the template or custom route, it's essential that your site is both functional and responsive. It's vital that you regularly check that all links on your site are working, and that social sharing buttons are functional. Just as important is ensuring that your site is fully responsive, meaning it displays and functions as well on mobile as on desktop.

SEO

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is the science of getting your website seen on the internet. The foundation of a successful SEO strategy is keyword research. What you're aiming to do is identify the keywords that your prospective customers are likely to use when looking for the products and services you offer.

Once you have identified your core keywords, the next step is to structure your website in a search engine friendly way. Links need to be coherent and submitting a good xml sitemap to Google will go a long way. Also, be sure to include relevant keywords within your URLs to help improve website rankings.

To improve your website's SEO, try out **UK2's SEO Guru**.

Content

However, no matter how technically superb your site may be, if your content lacks originality and fails to engage readers, you'll have a hard time getting found in Google.

The content you distribute through website must be well-researched, engaging, and original. Businesses need to think carefully about what types of information their target audiences are looking for. Take some time to think about whether they are interested in "how-to guides", product reviews, informative blog posts, or case studies, then tailor your content offering around what you think will bring the most value to your target audience.

It's also important to tell your story. Use your blog and social media channels to explain to potential customers who you are, where you've come from, and what values drive your company.

Security

Last but not least, your website will need to be secured. One of the most effective ways to do this is to add Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) technology to your website. An SSL certificate encrypts all information sent and received between server and browser, meaning that any information you enter on a secure SSL website is encrypted and cannot be intercepted or deciphered. Adding an SSL certificate to your website will prove reassuring both for you and your visitors.