



If a business is not online, *does anybody hear it?*

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With well over a million small businesses in Canada, finding new customers or, better yet, having them find you is becoming more and more challenging. In fact, in a recent RBC survey, 52 per cent of small business owners said that finding clients and developing their market was the biggest challenge at start-up. That same survey found that one in three business owners would do things differently if they were to start over again, with 46 per cent saying they would invest in better advertising and/or promotion.

These results only reinforce the fact that a strong marketing plan could go a long way toward benefitting your overall business plan, outlining how you intend to acquire, retain and grow your customer base in order to generate revenue for your business. As part of that plan, it is essential to choose the right distribution/marketing channel.

It is estimated that more than 80 per cent of Canadians are currently online, spending an average of 43.5 hours a month online in the last months of 2010. This statistic places Canadians far ahead of second-place South Koreans and almost double the global average, according to data from comScore, an online data measurement company.

Surprisingly, Google estimates that as many as 1.2 million businesses in Canada do not have a website - one of the most cost effective marketing tools in the world today. The most likely reasons a Canadian business might not yet be leveraging the Web are fears that it is too costly or complicated, or even unnecessary. Yet, one in five Google searches are for local content, according to Google Canada.

To help Canadian Business get online, RBC Royal Bank recently teamed up with Google to launch Canada Get Your Business Online, providing free websites with a .ca domain and free advice for businesses across Canada.

To get your business online visit <http://www.gybo.ca/> to choose a domain name, upload information and photos and then publish. This initiative further underscores RBC's commitment to providing specialized relevant business and financial advice and support to Canadian retailers. Visit the RBC Advice Centre: <http://www.rbcroyalbank.com/commercial/advice/industry-expertise/retail/index.html> for more information.

Here are some considerations to keep in mind when planning what type of site you are going to develop:

First of all, no matter what type of site you decide on, all retail websites should include at minimum both an accurate description of what products or services you provide, and your contact information - an active email address which you monitor and respond to, a telephone number and your physical address.

Another consideration is deciding how interactive your website is going to be and what services it will provide.

Are you in a position to offer a full e-commerce site? Will customers be purchasing from your website? If so, how will you collect funds? You have to build an infrastructure to support an e-commerce site.

Are you going to offer social interactivity (e.g. recommendations, comments)? A positive online review has tremendous impact; however, a negative review can have an equally strong impact. It's important to develop a plan to deal with potentially negative commentary in a way that protects your brand but still respects the consumer.

Remember, you are the only one who knows what online content best represents your company.

Finally, it's important to set goals for your online marketing efforts and track the results where possible. You can then use this information to fine-tune your next campaign for a better return on your investment. And don't forget word-of-mouth - a strong recommendation from one customer to a friend could be the best advertisement of all.

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Jim Mulligan, RBC, National Director, Retail Client and Business Strategy, leads a team of RBC retail specialists who fully understand the opportunities and challenges of a retail business. RBC's specialized teams provide relevant industry-specific financial and business advice to help Retailers grow their business, enhance employee loyalty, reduce risk and prevent fraud.

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