



**eBC**  

---

**eBUSINESS  
CONNECTION**

Small Business to e-Business  
For Under \$100 Per Month



# Small Business To e-Business For Under \$100 Per Month

e-Business is about so much more than selling on the 'net'.

There are a number of misconceptions about the Internet as a tool for small business; it's expensive, there's no way to calculate a return or even be sure of a return on investment, the business does not have a product that will "sell" on the web. e-Business is about so much more than selling on the 'net'. There are many simple things a small business can do to take advantage of the technology to increase revenue and reduce costs.

## 1. Electronic invoice presentment

Cash flow is likely the most significant source of stress for small and medium businesses. The work is done or the product is sent, the invoice is created, printed and sent and then the wait for the cheque begins. What if you cut out all of the upfront delivery and could get the invoice to the person who needs to sign for it in minutes instead of days. If you deliver your invoices by email you can save close to ten days in many cases. By simply creating an invoice in MS Word or Excel and then converting it to Adobe Acrobat format (so it cannot be tampered with) and then attaching it to an email sent to the appropriate person, you could speed up the cash collection of your business.

## 2. Purchase supplies online

How many times do you or someone on your staff go to Staples or Office Depot or Grand & Toy for supplies? When you go for supplies how many things do you pick up that were impulse buys? If you save up your orders for paper, pens and printer cartridges until you have \$50 worth you can place an order through one of the major office supplies retailer's websites and get them delivered free.

## 3. Email marketing

Gather email addresses every chance you get. Put those addresses in a contact manager like Outlook with information about the client, prospect or contact. Keep a record of customer preferences. Send focused emails to your clients with information about products and services that will be of interest to them. For instance if you discover that you are overstocked in a particular item you can send emails to those clients that have purchased that item in the past and offer them a special deal to take the overstock and thereby reduce your inventory exposure. An email newsletter is a great way to stay in touch with customers and prospects.



An email newsletter is a great way to stay in touch with customers and prospects.

#### **4. Online banking**

Most banks now offer Internet banking giving you access to your business accounts. From this access you can pay bills from a wide variety of suppliers including government remittances. Using this service can put you in that much more control of paying your bills on time - not too soon and not too late, incurring late penalties. These banking services usually permit you to download your bank statement and activity to an accounting system like QuickBooks and Simply Accounting. Using this feature may save your bookkeeper one to two hours per month in entry into your system. If you use a part time bookkeeper or a bookkeeping service this can result in real savings.

#### **5. Tenders on the Internet Do you ever respond to tenders from the federal, provincial or municipal government or crown corporation?**

If you do you need to be connected to the online tender service call Merx. ([www.cebra.com](http://www.cebra.com)) Every official tender is published on this site and you can gain access for as little as \$6 per month. You can even sign up for a service that will send you a notification when a tender for your product or service is posted. There are also a number of online marketplaces that your company can subscribe to that will provide access to requests for proposals or quotations. Services like [www.northernsupplier.com](http://www.northernsupplier.com) [www.northernsupplier.com](http://www.northernsupplier.com) for the North Western Ontario trading area or [www.rigsupplies.com](http://www.rigsupplies.com) for the oil service industry are good examples.

#### **6. Customer or Employee Intranet There are many situations where you need a secure place to store information that can only be accessed by password and user ID.**

If you send updates to investors or have policy manuals for employees or provide unique information just for established customers then you might consider using one of the many intranet services. In one situation in which I am involved we share information with investors by using Community Zero ([www.communityzero.com](http://www.communityzero.com)). We use the free service that is adequate for our needs. They provide a very fast and comprehensive service for a monthly fee. Using this type of product permits us to exchange confidential information that we do not want to send by email. Visit the Community Zero site and see for yourself what is possible.

#### **7. Retail Through an Online Auction**

I often advise people who operate small retail businesses to test their product sales by listing some items on e-bay ([www.ebay.ca](http://www.ebay.ca)). Uniquely manufactured products such as crafts, antiques or other collectibles are a perfect fit for this type of sale. I have even heard of small businesses actually closing a physical store and selling everything this way. Getting products listed is fairly simple and you will know quickly if this is the way for you. All you really need is access to a computer and scanner or digital camera. The site supplies everything else.



I often advise people who operate small retail businesses to test their product sales by listing some items on eBay.

### 8. Market Research

Want to sell your products in China, Latin America or the State of Texas? The internet provides an almost endless source of great market research. Sites such as Industry Canada's Strategis site have everything you need to know ([www.strategis.gc.ca](http://www.strategis.gc.ca)) How about gathering information about your own local markets. Try visiting the Canadian Business Services site ([www.cbcs.org](http://www.cbcs.org)). They have an impressive library of information of interest to small and medium enterprises.

### 9. Choose Products and Services Supplied By An ASP

An Application Service Provider (ASP) supplies access to a variety of applications that you can use and only pay for that use. No need to buy your own copies of expensive applications. I accessed a list of Canadian ASP's at the site [www.aspstreet.com](http://www.aspstreet.com) and found over 200 organizations supplying all manners of applications including accounting, HR and payroll to name a few. Before you build your own, why not see if it already exists.

### 10. Brochureware

If you have not noticed, in the last nine suggestions we have not included creating a website. This is because I believe that there are several things that a business should do to get ready to plan and build one. Once you have experimented with some of the other ideas it will be time to create your site. The first and simplest version is just an electronic version of your brochure. These will assist you in informing your customers about what you do and where and how you do it. A brochureware site can save you money if you already print hard copy material and mail or fax it. If you are just starting out with e-business, I recommend creating a brochureware site to get your feet wet. But just building it, and not marketing it, is a waste. Make sure you let customers and prospects know where it is and how to access it. We will discuss internet marketing, an extremely important topic, in a later issue.

By Bob Gardiner of the Canadian E-Business Leadership Program. Sign up for the Canadian E-Business Leadership newsletter at [www.eleadership.ca](http://www.eleadership.ca).